



**A University of Sussex PhD thesis**

Available online via Sussex Research Online:

<http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/>

This thesis is protected by copyright which belongs to the author.

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Please visit Sussex Research Online for more information and further details

# Reading Incompletion: The Fiction of David Foster Wallace

Tim Cahill Gurowich

Submitted for the examination of Doctor of Philosophy in English  
University of Sussex  
September 2019

## Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

*Tim Cahill Gurowich*

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

TIM CAHILL GUROWICH

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

READING INCOMPLETION: THE FICTION OF DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

SUMMARY

This thesis makes a contribution to the growing field of criticism on David Foster Wallace, reconsidering the fundamental question of *how we read* Wallace's fiction—the particular interpretative activity demanded by his work. Wallace's fiction is essentially defined by its incompleteness: an unfinished-ness which forms a foundational structural and thematic principle throughout his career. Tracing the various kinds of incompleteness found across Wallace's oeuvre, this thesis questions how these incompletenesses inform our readerly responses to his writing. In this, it shows how Wallace's work provokes a particularly self-conscious form of 'active reading', one which makes us persistently aware of our own role in 'realising' or 'completing' the text. This enquiry draws on a range of theoretical sources, including Iser's phenomenology of reading, Blanchot's conception of the 'solitude' of the literary work, and Felski's contemporary discussions of the affective dimensions of the reading process. Ultimately, it shows how Wallace's writing directs us *outwards*, inviting us to consider more broadly the complex, participatory nature of reading itself—the extent to which interpretation always involves an encounter with incompleteness, a negotiation with an unfinished-ness inherent in every literary text.

This investigation takes a chronological approach—tracing the development of Wallace's concerns across his career—but also a thematic one, using each chapter to address a different facet of incompleteness. The first two chapters focus on Wallace's reading, addressing his intertextual engagements, both literary and philosophical, in *The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair*. Chapter three investigates the tension between encyclopaedic 'mastery' and inevitable incompleteness in *Infinite Jest*. Chapter four explores the focus on silence and absence which characterises *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *Oblivion*. Finally, chapter five draws these various enquiries together in reading the radical unfinished-ness of Wallace's posthumously-published final novel *The Pale King*.

## Acknowledgments

Firstly, my unreserved thanks to my two supervisors, Maria Lauret and Peter Boxall, who have consistently offered thoughtful, intriguing, and considerate feedback over the course of this project. I could not have hoped for a better supervisory team, and would not have made it to the end without both of their kind and generous support.

Over the course of my time at Sussex, I have been lucky enough to have met and worked with a series of kind, brilliant, and inspiring people: thanks especially (though not exclusively) to Becky Harding, Joe Upton, Pete Brown, Kiron Ward, Katherine Kruger, Charlotte Terrell, Byron Heffer, Lana Harper, Michael Rowland, Laura Gill, Tom Houlton, Chelsea Olsen, Ross Owens, Harriet Barratt, Matthew Lecznar, Laura Vellacott, Pam Thurschwell, Sam Solomon, Andrea Haslanger, Jason Price, and Bill McEvoy. Particular thanks to the organisers and attendees of the Sussex English Graduate Seminar, the *Ulysses*, *Infinite Jest*, and *2666* reading groups, and the 2017 conference ‘Reading and Its Objects’, all of which had a profound impact on the eventual direction of this thesis.

Thanks equally to my friends outside academia, who have likewise inspired and supported me in innumerable ways, and been considerate enough to refrain from asking too frequently when I was actually going to get this thing finished. Special thanks to Tom Cullimore, Rachael Malcolm, Lewis Fawbert, Emily Whitby, George Doherty, Harry Doherty, Oli Doodson, James Kettle, Alice Jones, Dakota Richards, Libby Beckett, Hannah McLoughlin, and Ffion Jones. Thanks also to Scott Cupit, Arrianne O’Shea, Faraday Loughlin, Greta Leipute, Jerry Marble, Rob Pettitt, Katy Leicester, Nicole Barrons, Liz Gibb, Will Segerman, and Ruth Fillery-Travis, for keeping me dancing.

Enormous thanks to my family, and especially to my parents and brother, who have been a source of unwavering understanding, kindness, and support. And to Lynne and Hannah Cahill, for not interrupting the wedding (and for everything else).

Finally, my deepest thanks to Alice, to whom this thesis is dedicated, and without whom it would not exist.

## Funding

This thesis was generously supported by the CHASE AHRC Doctoral Training Partnership (Award ref: 1500769) and University of Sussex School of English.

## Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <i>Declaration</i> .....   | ii  |
| <i>Summary</i> .....   | iii |
| <i>Acknowledgments &amp; Funding</i> .....                             | iv  |
| Introduction.....  | 1   |
| 1. ‘The limits of my world’: <i>The Broom of the System</i> .....      | 24  |
| 2. The Journey Worstward: <i>Girl with Curious Hair</i> .....          | 49  |
| 3. Failed Entertainment: <i>Infinite Jest</i> .....                    | 79  |
| 4. ‘. . .’: <i>Brief Interviews</i> and <i>Oblivion: Stories</i> ..... | 107 |
| 5. Unfinished Reading: <i>The Pale King</i> .....                      | 155 |
| Conclusion .....   | 222 |
| Bibliography .....   | 229 |

I should have liked to produce a good book. This has not come about, but the time is past in  
which I could improve it.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, preface to *Philosophical Investigations* (1953)

## Introduction

### Reading Endings

‘You can trust me’, R.V. says, watching her hand. ‘I’m a man of my’<sup>1</sup>

The close of David Foster Wallace’s 1987 debut novel *The Broom of the System* presents us with a sentence, and thus a text, without an ending. While apparently pointing towards a specific endpoint (in this case, the single, final word ‘word’), the novel’s closing sentence teasingly leaves a blank space for the reader to fill. Taken at face value, Rick Vigorous’ unfinished final utterance seems merely an ironic—and arguably self-indulgent—joke on the part of its author. Reading the first draft of *Broom*, Wallace’s agent Bonnie Nadell insisted that ‘[y]ou absolutely cannot end the book with an incomplete sentence [. . .] I just feel it isn’t fair to leave all the ends dangling’.<sup>2</sup> Her response is illuminating, in part in its articulation of the readerly frustration provoked by the novel’s ‘dangling’ ending, but also in the fact that it was finally ignored by Wallace altogether. In his reply Wallace defended the novel’s final line, arguing that ‘the way [he] conceived and wrote the book’ did not place emphasis on “resolution” as a major value’.<sup>3</sup> Surveying this exchange, we are given a glimpse of the significance which *Broom*’s denial of syntactic or narrative ‘resolution’, its final lapse into potentially frustrating ‘silence’, holds for Wallace’s fictional project—a significance which far exceeds its ostensible status as a throwaway metafictional gag.

*Broom*’s incomplete final line in part gestures towards an extended tradition of literary works which deliberately end mid-sentence, including Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, Beckett’s *Malone Dies*, and Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Beyond this, however, it also serves as an articulation of a wider denial of formal, thematic, or narrative resolution, manifested in various forms throughout Wallace’s novels and stories, which comes to stand as a defining feature of his oeuvre. The five books of fiction published in Wallace’s lifetime confront us with a series of comparably frustrated endings, a succession of narratives united in their failure to come to a definite close. ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way’—the long story which closes Wallace’s 1989 collection *Girl with Curious Hair*—offers a

---

<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (New York: Penguin, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Bonnie Nadell, ‘Letter to Wallace, 28 October 1985’, Bonnie Nadell Collection of David Foster Wallace, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Box 1.1.

<sup>3</sup> Wallace, ‘Letter to Nadell, 31 October 1985’, Nadell Collection, Box 1.1.



142-page narrative of a terminally frustrated ‘journey west’ which, like the endlessly deferred road trip it depicts, breaks down before reaching its promised destination.<sup>4</sup> Wallace’s 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*, meanwhile, notably withholds any plot resolution, abruptly cutting off before closing the ‘loop’ of its circular narrative structure.<sup>5</sup> Wallace’s two subsequent books, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and *Oblivion* (2004), are likewise characterised by self-conscious incompletions: as, for example, in the shift into schematic notes in the second part of ‘Adult World’,<sup>6</sup> or the metafictional twist which interrupts the conclusion of ‘Good Old Neon’.<sup>7</sup> These works present us with a continued recapitulation of *Broom*’s closing unfinished-ness, pointing us, like Rick’s final exclamation, in the direction of a specific ending, but lapsing into an unavoidable incompleteness.

Of course, any discussion of this subject must acknowledge a more radical example of the unfinished in Wallace’s work. In September 2008, Wallace killed himself, leaving behind a work-in-progress, posthumously published in 2011. *The Pale King* offers an incompleteness wholly distinct from the deliberately frustrated endings of Wallace’s preceding fiction.<sup>8</sup> Assembled for publication from the author’s working notes and drafts by Wallace’s editor Michael Pietsch, the novel presents a concrete unfinished-ness, a terminal ‘silence’ which, far from gesturing towards any defined point of resolution, rather opens out onto a more fundamental instance of the unspeakable and unreadable. While demanding, like all of Wallace’s fiction, that the reader negotiate, and perhaps even ‘fill in’, its textual and narrative gaps, the novel also reminds us how far any interpretative effort to definitively ‘finish’ or understand the text will always fall short. In contrast with the self-conscious terminal silences of Sterne, Joyce, or Pynchon, *TPK*’s unfinished ending rather invokes the ruptured conclusions of Kafka’s *The Castle*, Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, or Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman*—texts which, even in their superficially ‘complete’, published status, are defined by a manifest unfinished-ness. Even as *TPK* echoes the strategies of Wallace’s preceding novels and stories, it finally works to trouble our interpretation of its ‘blank spaces’, forcing us to rethink the way we respond to the novel—and, perhaps, to Wallace’s fiction as a whole.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace, ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way’, in *Girl with Curious Hair* (New York: Norton, 1989), pp. 231–373.

<sup>5</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Wallace, ‘Adult World II’, in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001), pp. 156–61.

<sup>7</sup> Wallace, ‘Good Old Neon’, in *Oblivion: Stories* (London: Abacus, 2004), pp. 141–81.

<sup>8</sup> Wallace, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (London: Penguin, 2012).

This thesis asks how the various instances of incompleteness in Wallace's fiction work to inform or affect our readerly responses to these texts. What kind of reading do they demand? And, more broadly, what do they tell us about the nature of literary reading, the complex entanglement which characterises any readerly encounter with a literary work? My investigation will explore how these disparate versions of the unfinished are brought inescapably (and often uncomfortably) together in any reading of Wallace's fiction. I shall examine, in particular, the relationship between the 'deliberate' incompleteness of *Broom* or *Jest* and *TPK*'s inevitable compositional unfinished-ness. In so doing, I suggest that the incompleteness of Wallace's writing demand—and point towards—a particular mode of reading, one capable of self-consciously confronting the gaps, breaches, flaws, spaces, and silences which punctuate and define these works. In tracing the outline of this 'unfinished reading', I finally want to consider how Wallace's writing might direct us outwards, inviting us to consider the complex, participatory nature of reading itself—the extent to which any readerly engagement with a work of fiction always involves an encounter with incompleteness, a negotiation with, and submission to, an unfinished-ness fundamental to every literary text.

### Reading 'Wallace Studies'

Since his death in 2008, Wallace has been the focus of an ever-expanding field of popular and academic discussion, his life and writing serving as the subjects for a biography,<sup>9</sup> a bestselling memoir/extended interview,<sup>10</sup> two films,<sup>11</sup> and a wealth of newspaper and magazine articles. It has become something of a critical cliché to position Wallace as a pre-eminent 'voice of his generation', a writer who uniquely articulated the particular anxieties of late-20<sup>th</sup>/early-21<sup>st</sup> century American culture.<sup>12</sup> In a 2009 retrospective, Jon Baskin suggested that Wallace's authorial method was 'rooted in the conviction that literature ought to address the paradoxes and confusions of its moment': Baskin and others have seen the looping self-consciousness of

---

<sup>9</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (London: Granta Publications, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Respectively, John Krasinski's adaptation of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (IFC Films, 2009), and James Ponsoldt's *The End of the Tour* (A24, 2015), which adapted Lipsky's memoir.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, 'The Writer Who Was The Voice Of A Generation', *All Things Considered*, NPR, 2012, 2 September 2012 <<https://www.npr.org/2012/09/02/160248690/the-writer-who-was-the-voice-of-a-generation>> [accessed 14 May 2019].

Wallace's fiction, its impersonation of 'a mind choked with manipulative jargon and self-conscious prattle', as evoking and responding to the acutely paradoxical and confusing qualities of American life at the turn of the millennium.<sup>13</sup> A decade after his death, Wallace's writing is still regularly cited for its continued capacity to speak to the texture and concerns of 21<sup>st</sup> century American experience. Speaking at a memorial for Wallace in 2008, Don DeLillo described Wallace's fiction and essays as reading like 'the scroll fragments of a distant future',<sup>14</sup> and the steady stream of articles citing Wallace's prescience in anticipating variously the growth of the internet, the invention of Skype, or the presidency of Donald Trump, provide evidence for the enduring influence of his work today.<sup>15</sup> *Infinite Jest*, specifically, has been much referenced, not least in Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez's recent, arresting assertion that 'We are living in "the Year of Perdue Chicken"' <sup>16</sup>

Alongside this ongoing popular conversation, the past decade has seen the development of a growing body of academic criticism focused on Wallace. Following a handful of foundational articles and monographs published during his lifetime,<sup>17</sup> the period since Wallace's death has been marked by an exponential increase in scholarly work, with essay collections,<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Jon Baskin, 'Death Is Not the End', *The Point*, Spring 2009, para. 2

<<https://thepointmag.com/2009/criticism/death-is-not-the-end>> [accessed 14 May 2019].

<sup>14</sup> Don DeLillo, 'Informal Remarks from the David Foster Wallace Memorial Service in New York on October 23, 2008', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> See Katie Herzog, 'We Have Entered David Foster Wallace's Dystopian Future', *The Stranger*, 19 December 2017 <<https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2017/12/19/25639990/we-have-entered-david-foster-wallaces-dystopian-future>> [accessed 14 May 2019]; and John Michael, 'Donald Trump Is Ushering In the *Infinite Jest* Apocalypse', *HuffPost*, 20 April 2015 <[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/donald-trump-is-ushering-\\_b\\_8334542](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/donald-trump-is-ushering-_b_8334542)> [accessed 13 May 2019].

<sup>16</sup> Irina Aleksander, 'How Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Other Progressives Are Defining the Midterms', *Vogue*, 15 October 2018 <<https://www.vogue.com/article/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-interview-vogue-november-2018-issue>> [accessed 13 May 2019].

<sup>17</sup> Particularly Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003); Stephen J. Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*, 1st edn (London: Continuum, 2003); Mary K. Holland, "'The Art's Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 47.3 (2006), 218–42.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, David Hering, ed., *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010); Boswell and Burn, eds., *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Boswell, ed., *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014); Philip Coleman, ed., *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace* (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2015); and Ralph Clare, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

monographs,<sup>19</sup> and journal articles,<sup>20</sup> as well as frequent academic conferences,<sup>21</sup> and, more recently, the establishment of an international society (and accompanying academic journal) dedicated to Wallace.<sup>22</sup> This thriving field of ‘Wallace Studies’ exhibits a striking diversity of critical approaches: with scholars variously reading Wallace’s writing through the lenses of philosophy, politics, psychoanalysis, technology, economics, geography, religion, neuroscience, and notions of the ‘posthuman’ (to name only a few). This multiplicity of perspectives has been further broadened by a large and committed community of non-academic readers: from its inception, ‘Wallace studies’ has been shaped, as Adam Kelly has noted, by significant interaction between scholarly and non-scholarly readings, a process of ‘cross-pollination’ facilitated by the growth of the internet while Wallace was writing.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, the 2010 public opening of Wallace’s archive at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin—containing the author’s drafts, letters, and personal library—has offered further scope for ever more varied interpretations of Wallace’s oeuvre.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Lucas Thompson, *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace’s Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Marshall Boswell, *The Wallace Effect* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Tim Groenland, *The Art of Editing: Raymond Carver and David Foster Wallace* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> For an early survey of this emergent field, see Adam Kelly ‘David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline’, *Irish Journal of American Studies Online*, 2, 2010, 47–59, later revised in 2015 as ‘David Foster Wallace: The Critical Reception’, in *Critical Insights*, pp. 46–62.

<sup>21</sup> The most significant of these include ‘Consider David Foster Wallace’—the first international conference dedicated to Wallace’s work—organised by David Hering and held at University of Liverpool in July 2009; ‘Infinite Wallace’, a conference held the Sorbonne-Nouvelle and École Normale Supérieure in Paris in September of 2014; and the annual ‘David Foster Wallace Conference’ held at Illinois State University since 2014.

<sup>22</sup> The International David Foster Wallace Society (<<https://www.dfwociety.org/>>) was founded in 2016, with the first issue of the *Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* published in 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Kelly, ‘Death of the Author’, p. 48. Kelly suggests that Wallace was ‘the first major writer to live and die in the internet age’ (para. 3). This ‘cross-pollination’ was aided by the presence of dedicated websites such as Nick Maniatis’ *The Howling Fantods* (<<http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/dfw/>> [accessed 15 May 2019]), as well as ‘Wallace-l’, a (still active) email listserv administered by Matt Bucher. More recently, see *The Great Concavity*—a podcast hosted by Bucher and Dave Laird—for further fruitful discussions between academic and non-academic readers of Wallace’s work.

<sup>24</sup> Hering notes that the availability of Wallace’s papers has resulted in something of an ‘archival turn’ in Wallace scholarship (Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 9), and we see this suggestion borne out in the wave of recent essays and monographs which have grounded their investigations in a detailed analysis of Wallace’s drafts, letters, and/or marginal annotations. See, for example, Hering, *Fiction and Form*; Thompson, *Global Wallace*; Groenland, *Art of Editing*; Mike Miley, ‘... And Starring David Foster Wallace as Himself: Performance and Persona in *The Pale King*’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 57.2 (2016), 191–207; and John Roache, ‘“The Realer, More Enduring and Sentimental Part of Him”: David Foster Wallace’s Personal Library and Marginalia’, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5.1 (2017) <<https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.142>>.

It is, however, nonetheless possible to discern a number of clear and significant trends in Wallace scholarship since 2008, most pertinently a movement away from approaching Wallace's work on his 'own terms'. It is striking how far Wallace's writing reflexively works to prescribe and inform its own critical reception. In an early essay on David Markson's 1988 experimental novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Wallace characterises Markson's text as an 'INTERPRET-ME' fiction, an exemplar of a class of novels which 'not only cry out for what we call "critical interpretations" but actually try to help direct them'.<sup>25</sup> In many respects, this offers an acute characterisation of Wallace's own work. Stephen Burn has suggested that Wallace's 'approach to fiction' is 'nearly always connected to metafiction',<sup>26</sup> and we can see, surveying Wallace's novels and stories—from the creative-writing workshop framework of 'Westward' to the series of direct addresses from the 'real author' which punctuate *TPK*—a persistent concern with interrogating the fictionality of his own work, and, with this, reflexively probing (and inevitably informing) our readerly interpretation of these texts.<sup>27</sup>

Wallace's tendency to 'help direct' the interpretation of his work is further manifested in the extratextual discussions found in his interviews and non-fiction essays. This body of supplementary writing—and particularly the early-career statements of artistic intent offered in his interview with Larry McCaffery and his essay 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction'—offers a persuasive 'frame' through which readers are invited to interpret Wallace's literary project.<sup>28</sup> Adam Kelly has argued that, while 'all great writers teach us how to read them', Wallace 'carried out this task in a more hands-on manner than usual', and we can see how the apparent 'artistic manifesto' offered by this 'essay-interview nexus'<sup>29</sup>—and, beyond

---

<sup>25</sup> Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*' (1990), in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*, 2nd edn (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 16. While Wallace's relationship with the specific postmodern metafiction of his literary predecessors (as exemplified by, for example, John Barth) is an undeniably vexed and ambivalent one, his work nevertheless meets the criteria for Patricia Waugh's broad definition of metafiction as 'fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality', a practice which, Waugh argues, is 'as old (if not older) than the novel itself' (Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1984)).

<sup>27</sup> Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> See Wallace, 'Interview with Larry McCaffery' (1993), in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 21–52; and Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' (1993), in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 1998), pp. 21–82. These two pieces were first published together in the Summer 1993 issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*.

<sup>29</sup> Kelly, 'Death of the Author', pp. 49–50.

this, by the extended metacommentary offered within Wallace's stories, essays, and interviews over the course of his career—have profoundly informed the critical conversation surrounding Wallace's fiction.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, much early scholarship on Wallace followed lines of enquiry that the author himself established—from his ambivalent relationship with postmodernism,<sup>31</sup> to his critique of irony,<sup>32</sup> to his famous call for a fiction of 'single-entendre principles' at the conclusion of 'E Unibus Pluram'.<sup>33</sup> These foundational studies tended to read Wallace's work as offering a diagnosis, and even a remedy, for the ills of contemporary US culture, building on Wallace's definition of 'good art' as that which 'locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness'.<sup>34</sup> Boswell introduces the notion of Wallace's work as 'both diagnosis and cure',<sup>35</sup> while Baskin positions Wallace's fiction as the author's 'sincere prescription' for the 'pain' which he identified everywhere in late capitalist America.<sup>36</sup> These scholars interpret Wallace's fiction in terms of adherence to (or, occasionally, divergence from) the 'nourishing, redemptive' fictional project envisioned in Wallace's metacommentary,<sup>37</sup> viewed, as Kelly has suggested, 'not primarily in terms of aesthetic representation, but of ethical intervention'.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young' (1988), in *Both Flesh and Not*, pp. 37–68; 'Greatly Exaggerated' (1992), in *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, pp. 138–45; 'Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky' (1996), in *Consider the Lobster: Essays and Arguments* (London: Abacus, 2007), pp. 255–74; and the various interviews collected in Burn, *Conversations*.

<sup>31</sup> See Robert's McLaughlin's characterisation of Wallace's 'post-postmodern' fiction as 'responding to the perceived dead end of postmodernism' (McLaughlin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World', *Symploke*, 12.1 (2004), 53–68); Boswell's description of Wallace as 'a nervous member of some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnameable) third wave of modernism' (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 1).

<sup>32</sup> See Boswell on Wallace's outlining of the 'exhausted vitality' of postmodern irony (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 16); A. O. Scott on Wallace's attempts to 'turn irony back on itself, to make his fiction relentlessly conscious of its own self-consciousness' (Scott, 'The Panic of Influence', *New York Review of Books*, 10 February 2000, para. 22 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/feb/10/the-panic-of-influence/>> [accessed 17 May 2019]).

<sup>33</sup> See Konstantinou on Wallace's efforts to 'discover or invent a viable postironic ethos for U.S. literature and culture and the End of History' (Konstantinou, 'No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief', in *Legacy Of David Foster Wallace*, pp. 83–112; Kelly on Wallace's work's exemplification of 'New Sincerity' in US fiction (Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, pp. 131–46). Note, however, that Kelly's reading is more nuanced than his title implies, establishing a conditional conception of 'sincerity'—via a careful reading of Wallace alongside the theory of Jacques Derrida—which is built on an innate undecidability, arriving at the conclusion that 'being a "post-postmodernist" of Wallace's generation means never quite being sure whether you are one, whether you have really managed to escape narcissism, solipsism, irony and insincerity' (Kelly, 'New Sincerity', p. 145).

<sup>34</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with McCaffery', p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Baskin, para. 23.

<sup>37</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with McCaffery', p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Kelly, *Death of the Author*, p. 51.

The years since Wallace's death have seen a decisive shift away from this pervasive 'diagnosis/cure' model, a shared critical effort to move beyond the 'established orthodoxy' identified by Kelly.<sup>39</sup> Where, as Hering notes, early Wallace criticism was at least partly concerned with making 'the case for Wallace's canonicity', subsequent scholarship has offered progressively more varied interpretations of Wallace's writing, broadening the scope of Wallace studies.<sup>40</sup> Lucas Thompson's 2016 monograph *Global Wallace*, for example, attempts to look beyond the 'national lines' which have defined the majority of criticism on Wallace (and which are 'deliberately signalled' within Wallace's own work): for Thompson, the 'widespread emphasis on Wallace as a quintessentially American figure' has 'obscured the more oblique, though equally important, global dimensions of Wallace's work'.<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey Severs' *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books* (2017), meanwhile, positions Wallace as 'a rebellious economic thinker, one who not only satirized the deforming effects of money but threw into question the logic of the monetary system'.<sup>42</sup>

The most significant example—for the purposes of this study—of the critical shift in Wallace scholarship since 2008 is offered by Clare Hayes-Brady's 2016 monograph *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*. Hayes-Brady does not abandon the interpretative frame established by Wallace's non-fiction writing, being still fundamentally concerned with the notion of Wallace's work as 'ethical intervention', and with the author's own conception of his 'redemptive' intent. She proceeds, however, from the assertion that Wallace's 'apparent redemptive project [. . .] is a failure, and its failure is a necessary part of the project'.<sup>43</sup> Rejecting the 'diagnosis/cure' model, she argues that the societal 'antidote' promised by Wallace's fiction 'is never presented, and never can be': reading against the grain of Wallace's authorial statements of intent, her enquiry directs us towards the inescapable flaws, contradictions, and limitations which characterise Wallace's fictional oeuvre.<sup>44</sup> Crucially,

---

<sup>39</sup> Kelly, *Death of the Author*, p. 50.

<sup>40</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson, *Global Wallace*, pp. 1, 4–5.

<sup>42</sup> Severs, *Balancing Books*, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 15. In addressing the apparent 'failure' of Wallace's fictional project, Hayes-Brady's study builds on the earlier foundational work of Mary K. Holland, who in 2006 offered the argument that *Jest* 'fails to deliver on the agenda that Wallace set for it, not only because it fails to eschew empty irony for the earnestness that Wallace imagines but also, and more importantly, because it fails to recognize and address the cultural drive toward narcissism that fuels and is fueled by that irony' (Holland, 'The Art's Heart's Purpose', p. 218).

however, she sees this failure as ‘inevitable and necessary’; indeed, ‘failure’, figured primarily in terms of an ‘absence of closure’, is positioned as a ‘generative force’ in Wallace’s work.<sup>45</sup> Though Hayes-Brady eschews a straightforwardly positive view of Wallace’s failures (insisting that the term ‘failure’ itself is ‘carefully chosen’ to reflect ‘a range of attributes, including the many very real shortcomings in Wallace’s writing’) she nevertheless finds something constructive within the limitations of Wallace’s work, the unavoidable gaps between his literary ideals and his own imperfect oeuvre.<sup>46</sup> In Hayes-Brady’s study, as in Thompson’s and Severs’, we find a deliberate effort to reframe the interpretative ‘orthodoxy’ established by Wallace himself, and to point us instead towards new and productive ways of reading Wallace’s body of work.

### Reading Incompletion

Building on this ongoing collective effort to rethink the project, strategies, and intertextual coordinates of Wallace’s work, I want to return to the fundamental question of *how we read* Wallace’s fiction. Undoubtedly, Wallace’s work is itself persistently concerned with this question. In his interviews and essays, Wallace repeatedly shares his conception of fiction as built on dialogic interaction between reader and author: in ‘Greatly Exaggerated’, Wallace refers to writing as ‘an act of communication between one human being and another’,<sup>47</sup> while in an interview with Laura Miller he describes fiction as ‘a conversation. There’s a relationship between the reader and the writer that’s very strange and complicated and hard to talk about’.<sup>48</sup> While Wallace’s (somewhat vaguely theorised) conception of the ‘communicative’ function of fiction has been addressed by critics,<sup>49</sup> my own focus is particularly on the readerly side of this literary ‘conversation’, the particular experience of approaching, engaging with, and interpreting Wallace’s texts. In his interview with McCaffery, Wallace describes the process of reading as a

---

<sup>45</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, pp. 8, 3, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, pp. 2. Hayes-Brady’s study is in part concerned with addressing the ‘serious structural and political shortcomings in Wallace’s work’, shortcomings which, Hayes-Brady argues, ‘emerge from his failure to overcome the distance between selves, and his often-paralyzing consciousness thereof’ (Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 7).

<sup>47</sup> Wallace, ‘Greatly Exaggerated’, p. 144.

<sup>48</sup> Wallace, ‘Interview with Laura Miller’ (1996), in *Conversations*, pp. 58–65 (p. 62).

<sup>49</sup> Most notably Hayes-Brady, who argues that Wallace’s artistic project is underpinned by a ‘drive to connect’, a ‘yearning for connection between selves’, and goes on to further investigate Wallace’s ‘conception, exploration, and execution of the process of communication’, attempting to pin down, through a reading of Wallace’s work and his non-fiction metacommentary, what ‘might in loose terms be called his philosophy of communication’ (Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, pp. viii, 93).



‘relationship’ between the ‘writer’s consciousness’ and the reader’s own, arguing that ‘in order for it to be anything like a full human relationship’, the reader is ‘going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work’.<sup>50</sup> That Wallace’s writing demands active participation by the reader has become a critical axiom: Hayes-Brady argues that Wallace’s fictional ‘communication’ is by definition a ‘dynamic process’, relying on ‘multiple agents engaging in mutual exchange, rather than on a unidirectional transfer of information’;<sup>51</sup> while Greg Carlisle asserts that the reader of *Jest* is ‘rewarded not by passive acceptance of easy answers or tidy resolutions, but by an active engagement with ongoing narratives’.<sup>52</sup> This thesis interrogates the precise nature of this readerly ‘engagement’: I intend to explore, question, and ultimately offer an account of the mode of interpretation invited (or, perhaps, demanded) by Wallace’s fiction.<sup>53</sup> It is from this perspective that I approach the issue of incompleteness in Wallace’s fiction. I would suggest that only through an investigation of the instances of unfinished-ness, breakage, and silence in Wallace’s writing can we understand the particular readerly ‘work’ it demands, a ‘work’ repeatedly (and often self-consciously) framed by Wallace as an effort by us, his readers, to subjectively ‘complete’ the unfinished text for ourselves. With this I position ‘incompleteness’ as a defining structural and thematic principle in Wallace’s fiction, present in various forms across practically every aspect of his work.

The significance of the incomplete in Wallace’s writing (and our reading of Wallace) has been addressed—albeit often only in passing—by a handful of critics: Carlisle, for example, has commented on Wallace’s ‘undefined-climax technique’, his tendency to leave climactic events unresolved or undefined [. . .] truncating the narrative as it makes an exponential rise to a climax that we’ll never reach’.<sup>54</sup> Burn, meanwhile, has outlined a ‘theory of vision’ for *TPK* which argues that the novel’s incompleteness can be understood as a ‘feature rather than a bug’: drawing on a neuroscientific model of the way the brain ‘fills in gaps in vision by “constructing what ‘ought’ to be there, on the evidence of the surrounding colour and pattern”’, Burn suggests

---

<sup>50</sup> Wallace, ‘Interview with McCaffery’, pp. 33–4.

<sup>51</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 94.

<sup>52</sup> Greg Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2007), Amazon Kindle eBook, ‘Introduction’.

<sup>53</sup> Although primarily concerned with Wallace’s fiction, my investigation does not abandon Wallace’s non-fiction metacommentary altogether. While I follow recent criticism in attempting to avoid reading Wallace ‘on his own terms’, I am nonetheless interested in how this framework impacts and shapes our readerly responses to Wallace’s fiction.

<sup>54</sup> Carlisle, ‘Introduction: Consider David Foster Wallace’, in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, pp. 12–23 (pp. 16–17).

that the reader ‘must act as the brain operating on the fragmented stimuli’ provided by the unfinished novel, ‘knitting together disparate episodes into some kind of coherent whole’.<sup>55</sup> Crucially, Burn positions this need for work as not merely a result of *TPK*’s unfinished state, but rather as part of a larger ‘poetics of incompleteness’ which characterises Wallace’s writing generally.<sup>56</sup> While I depart from Burn’s neuroscientific framework, my thesis is concerned with unpacking this ‘poetics of incompleteness’, addressing in greater depth than previous critics the unfinished-ness of Wallace’s work.

This incompletion has also been addressed from a different angle in recent studies which have approached Wallace’s fiction, and particularly the unfinished text of *TPK*, via consideration of notes and drafts held in Wallace’s archive.<sup>57</sup> These studies are informed by the theoretical model offered by ‘genetic criticism’, and its ‘attention to the dynamics of textual development’: Groenland, quoting Dirk Van Hulle, summarises that genetic critics are united in their desire to approach literary works not as a ‘single published text’, but rather as ‘a complex interplay between completion and incompletion’.<sup>58</sup> While I build on the work of Staes, Hering, and Groenland—and will continue to refer to the contents of Wallace’s archive—I diverge from the focus which they place on these archival materials. Where these critics are concerned with establishing an ‘objective’ picture of the unfinished shape of Wallace’s stories (as in Hering’s stated desire to construct of a genetic ‘map’ of Wallace’s fiction ‘as a developing system’), I focus on interrogating the uneasy, fundamentally *subjective* experience of reading Wallace’s fiction in its ‘final’ published (and yet still inescapably incomplete) state.<sup>59</sup>

My approach to the incompletion of Wallace’s work is also informed by Hayes-Brady’s conception of Wallace’s ‘failure’. Her understanding of the ‘generative failure’ of Wallace’s work is bound up with a reading of his fiction’s structural and thematic incompleteness, according to which a ‘resistance to endings’ is a ‘central part of his creative process’.<sup>60</sup> Failure

<sup>55</sup> Burn, ‘Toward a General Theory of Vision in Wallace’s Fiction’, *English Studies*, 95.1 (2014), 85–93 (p. 91).

<sup>56</sup> Burn makes explicit comparison between *TPK* and *Infinite Jest*, noting the lexical link between ‘infinite’ and the French ‘*in fini*—unfinished or incomplete’, and making the case that both texts are ‘designed to leave us with our own work still to do’ (Burn, ‘Theory of Vision’, p. 91).

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Staes, ‘Work in Process: A Genesis for *The Pale King*’, *English Studies*, 95.1 (2014), 70–84; Hering, *Fiction and Form*; and Groenland, ‘“A Recipe for a Brick”: *The Pale King* in Progress’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58.4 (2017), 365–76.

<sup>58</sup> Groenland, ‘A Recipe for a Brick’, p. 366; Dirk Van Hulle, qtd. in Groenland, ‘A Recipe for a Brick’, p. 367.

<sup>59</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 3.

is explicitly figured in terms of a ‘lack of, and resistance to, completion’, and the ‘recurrence of the incomplete in various guises throughout Wallace’s work’ is seen to speak ‘both of his desire for completion and his awareness of its impossibility’.<sup>61</sup> My enquiry follows Hayes-Brady in attending to the interrelatedness of incompleteness and failure, the degree to which the structural unfinished-ness of Wallace’s work is connected with an inescapable disappointment, with Wallace drawing persistent attention to the undeniable gaps between his stated literary ideals and the reality of his own writing. Where my work departs from Hayes-Brady’s however, is in my understanding of the shape and texture of these ‘gaps’ and the ways in which they work to direct our reading. Hayes-Brady’s study finally positions Wallace’s incompleteness in ‘generative’ terms: drawing on the pragmatic philosophy of Richard Rorty, she argues that Wallace’s writing is driven by an effort to ‘keep the conversation going’, finding, in its points of incompleteness and failure, a foregrounding of ‘the pragmatic importance of continuity’, a deliberate space for an ongoing dialogic engagement between reader and text.<sup>62</sup> My reading, however, is equally concerned with exploring the *limits* of this dialogic ‘space’, the extent to which Wallace’s unfinished fiction reflexively works both to invite and place inevitable restrictions on our interpretation. Reading Wallace’s fiction, we are repeatedly faced with narratives which—as in *Broom*’s unfinished final line—direct us towards a specific end-point, but which leave this gesture unfinished. Rather than Hayes-Brady’s pragmatic ‘continued conversation’, then—or Boswell’s characterisation of Wallace’s fiction as an ‘open system of communication [. . .] between author and reader’<sup>63</sup>—my enquiry reads these points of incompleteness as establishing an irresolvable tension between openness and closedness, between the dialogic potential of our readerly interpretation and the inevitable monologic limitations placed on us by the ‘broken’ literary text.<sup>64</sup>

In attempting to theoretically situate this incompleteness—in particular, the tension between the ‘open’ and the ‘closed’ which marks Wallace’s texts—it helps to consider Wallace’s ambivalent relationship with poststructuralist thought. Various critics have explored

---

<sup>61</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, pp. 3, 40.

<sup>62</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, pp. 2, 195.

<sup>63</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 31.

<sup>64</sup> My understanding of this tension between openness and closedness builds on the work of Hering, who likewise argues that Wallace’s fiction is ‘underpinned by a recurrent oscillation between narrative models of monologism and dialogism’, employing the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to offer ‘a sustained career-length model by which to map the problems of authorial monologism’ which characterise Wallace’s work (*Fiction and Form*, pp. 7, 18–19).

how Wallace's fiction was, from its beginnings, profoundly informed by the pervasive influence of 'theory' as encountered during his university studies in the 1980s. Hering, for example, argues that Wallace was 'continually faced with the ramifications of theoretical discourse upon the form of the novel itself', suggesting that Wallace's writing was particularly shaped by 'the integration of post-structuralist theory into academic syllabi'.<sup>65</sup> In his interview with McCaffery, Wallace himself reflects that

the way Barthian and Derridean post-structuralism's helped me the most as a fiction writer: once I'm done with the thing, I'm basically dead, and probably the text's dead; it becomes simply language, and language lives not just in but *through* the reader.<sup>66</sup>

Poststructuralist thought provides a potential framework for understanding the self-consciously participatory reading invited by Wallace's work.<sup>67</sup> Certainly, Roland Barthes' notion of the 'Death of the Author' (and the subsequent 'birth of the reader') offers a model of a text fundamentally shaped by active readerly interpretation.<sup>68</sup> Even more pertinently, Jacques Derrida presents a conception of reading founded on a radical textual incompleteness: in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida describes the writer as writing 'in a language and in a logic whose proper system, laws and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely'; the reader is figured as confronting a central incompleteness or absence at the heart of the text, a 'certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the language that he uses'.<sup>69</sup> While Wallace is indisputably influenced by his early

---

<sup>65</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 16. See also Kelly's assessment of the fact that Wallace's critics have 'demonstrated a marked tendency to utilise theory in a way that emphasise[s] Wallace's own assimilation to it, with the often explicit assumption that Wallace was himself versed in all these figures and engaging in implicit dialogue with them in his fiction' (Kelly, 'Death of the Author', p. 51).

<sup>66</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with McCaffery', p. 40. Wallace's engagement with 'theory' is further demonstrated in 'Greatly Exaggerated', his review of H.L. Hix's 1987 theoretical text *Morte D'Author: An Autopsy*, in which he makes explicit reference to Barthes, Derrida, Paul de Man, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak, among other philosophers and theorists.

<sup>67</sup> Hering, for example, has utilised Barthes' writing (and particularly 'The Death of the Author') in exploring Wallace's engagement with the 'question of authorial effacement' (and the 'dramatised instances of "possession" and ghostliness') throughout his fiction (Hering, *Fiction and Form*, pp. 16–17). Hayes-Brady, meanwhile, has commented on the extent to which the 'procedures of deconstruction' can be seen to 'echo throughout Wallace's writing'. Crucially, however, Hayes-Brady simultaneously argues that Wallace's work is in 'several important senses [. . .] anti-deconstruction', noting that 'the cataclysmic inwardness of poststructuralist textuality is superseded in Wallace's work by the sincere interpretive work of the reader, the uncontrolled but engaged commitment to the process' (Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 25).

<sup>68</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1967), in *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142–8 (p. 148).

<sup>69</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158.

reading of these poststructuralist thinkers, I would argue that the incomplete ‘spaces’ of his work are not, in the end, characterisable in the radically open, undecidable terms of Derrida’s ‘absent center’—the ‘nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions [come] into play’.<sup>70</sup> Rather, Wallace’s ‘silences’ persistently direct us towards a certain, specific (if unreachable) conclusion, an endpoint which closes off the possibility of Derridean ‘play and difference’, placing an inevitable limit on our interpretation. In this respect, the productive ‘openness’ of Wallace’s incompleteness is always qualified by a competing aspect of what Steven Connor has termed ‘finitude’: a sense of ‘that which is destined to end’, of ‘the endingness of things in general’.<sup>71</sup> This finitude is associated in part with temporality and death, but also with ‘the inescapability of limit or restriction’: this latter finitude is ‘hard to distinguish absolutely from indefiniteness’, denoting ‘not the certainty of coming to an end, but the certainty of ending unfinished’.<sup>72</sup> It is this suggestion of an inescapable limit, a paradoxical tension between terminal certainty and inevitable unfinished-ness, which I argue defines the incomplete ‘spaces’ of Wallace’s fiction, indelibly shaping our reading, both of the deliberate incompletions of his earlier work, and of the more radical, actual unfinished-ness of *TPK*.<sup>73</sup>

My enquiry draws on the theoretical work of a number of writers and philosophers who have attempted to theorise the process of reading, in particular Wolfgang Iser’s phenomenology of reading—an interpretative approach which ‘lays full stress on the idea that, in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in reading that text’.<sup>74</sup> Iser prefigures Wallace in his conception of the work of literature as a ‘form of communication’ and his focus on the question of ‘what happens to us through’ literary texts, the particular, mysterious ‘entanglement’ involved in approaching, or ‘communicating’ with, a literary work.<sup>75</sup> Significantly, Iser’s understanding of the reading

<sup>70</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 280.

<sup>71</sup> Steven Connor, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 189–90. Connor associates this ‘finitude’ particularly with the work of Samuel Beckett, a writer whose work, he argues, ‘always defaults to the question “what happens last?” or “how will the last thing of all happen?”’ (Connor, p. 190).

<sup>72</sup> Connor, p. 190.

<sup>73</sup> Kelly has indicated the critical potential in paying greater attention to ‘the limitations of [Wallace’s] vision’, commenting that limits, ‘after all, can be animating and enable: this is surely one of the primary insights offered by *Infinite Jest*’ (Kelly, ‘The Critical Reception’, pp. 59–60).

<sup>74</sup> Wolfgang Iser, ‘The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach’, *New Literary History*, 3.2 (1972), 279–99 (p. 279).

<sup>75</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. ix, x, 131.

process is founded not on total interpretative freedom—the radical undecidability of Derrida’s ‘play’—but rather a two-sided interaction: an activity ‘guided by the text’ and ‘processed by the reader, who is then, in turn, affected by what [they have] processed’.<sup>76</sup> While the text’s meaning is always partially ‘worked out by the reader’s imagination’ it is also, inevitably, circumscribed by ‘certain limits’ imposed by the text.<sup>77</sup> This readerly ‘interaction’ is, in fact, figured as an encounter with a kind of textual incompleteness: the reader of the literary work is, Iser suggests, necessarily confronted with ‘gaps in the text’, ‘blanks which the reader is to fill in’.<sup>78</sup> In its conception of deliberate textual ‘gaps’ which establish a space for readerly interpretation, Iser’s model of the reading process imagines a foundational unfinished-ness present in every literary text. This builds on the earlier phenomenology of Roman Ingarden, who argues that ‘every literary work is in principle incomplete and in need of further supplementation’—a supplementation which ‘can never be completed’.<sup>79</sup> We can see how Iser (and by extension Ingarden) offer a productive framework through which to approach the ‘gaps’ in Wallace’s work and the tension between interpretative freedom and textual limitation which defines our encounters with his ‘incomplete’ fiction.<sup>80</sup>

While Iser’s carefully-structured phenomenological model is useful, I want to attend to the idiosyncrasies of Wallace’s unfinished narratives, and the often uniquely unsettling reading demanded by his fiction. Thus, my enquiry is further informed by other theories of reading, including, for example, Barthes’ conception of the ‘writerly’—a class of literary works which ‘make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text’ (as opposed the ‘readerly’, which denotes those works which ‘can be read, but not written’, which plunge the reader ‘into a

---

<sup>76</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 163. Iser’s work is often considered within the wider context of ‘reader-response criticism’, a term which, as summarised by Jane P. Tompkins, does not denote a ‘conceptually unified critical position’, but which rather groups together a collection of critics whose work ‘refocus criticism on the reader’, ‘examin[ing] authors’ attitudes toward their reader, the kinds of readers various texts seem to imply, the role actual readers play in the determination of literary meaning, the relation of reading conventions to textual interpretation, and the status of the reader’s self’ (Tompkins, ‘An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism’, in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. by Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. ix–xxvi (p. ix)).

<sup>77</sup> Iser, ‘The Reading Process’, p. 281.

<sup>78</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 169.

<sup>79</sup> Roman Ingarden, qtd. in Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 170.

<sup>80</sup> Within Wallace scholarship, Iser’s work has largely been addressed only briefly: Toon Staes, for example, cites Iser alongside other reader-response critics in his discussion of the readerly ‘empathy’ provoked by Wallace’s work, observing how ‘gaps take center stage in *Infinite Jest*’, and going on to investigate the ways in which Wallace’s novel reflexively demands that the reader ‘fills in gaps in the text’ (Toon Staes, ‘Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach’, in *Long Thing*, pp. 23–42 (p. 29)).

kind of idleness').<sup>81</sup> I draw also on Maurice Blanchot's more complicated understanding of the 'interaction' at the heart of the reading process. Blanchot, like Iser, offers a model of reading as a fundamentally two-sided, participatory activity: the literary 'work' is only brought into being when it 'becomes the intimacy between someone who writes it and someone who reads it'.<sup>82</sup> This 'intimacy', however, is not a straightforward 'communication' or 'dialogue' between author and reader: Blanchot asserts that reading 'never asks of the book, and still less of the author: "What did you mean exactly? What truth, then, do you bring me?"'.<sup>83</sup> Rather, the act of reading is figured as an attempt to 'cast out' the author from the work altogether, to make of 'the book what the sea and the wind make of objects fashioned by men: a smoother stone, a fragment fallen from the sky without a past, without a future, the sight of which silences questions'.<sup>84</sup> Crucially, this process of authorial erasure does not result in a Barthesian 'birth of the reader', an assertion of readerly autonomy and control, but instead works to affirm the text's essential 'solitude':

It would seem, then, that to read is not to write the book again, but to allow the book to *be*: written—this time all by itself, without the intermediary of the writer, without anyone's writing it. The reader does not add [themselves] to the book, but tends primarily to relieve it of an author.<sup>85</sup>

Blanchot offers us a conception of reading which, while far removed from Iser's somewhat schematic phenomenology, nonetheless builds on a comparable notion of an incompleteness at the heart of the literary text. 'For the artist', Blanchot argues, 'the work is always infinite, unfinished'.<sup>86</sup> This notion of a text which both invites and resists our readerly attempts to 'fill in' its blank spaces offers us a suggestive model for approaching the particularly evocative self-conscious incompletenesses of Wallace's fiction.

My enquiry is also influenced by more contemporary critical discussions around the question of reading, and, in particular, by Rita Felski's influential (and controversial) 2015 monograph *The Limits of Critique*. Felski argues that the interpretative practice of 'critique'—a mode of critical reading 'against the grain and between the lines', defined by its 'suspicious' attempts to 'expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings' —

---

<sup>81</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), p. 4.

<sup>82</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), pp. 22–3.

<sup>83</sup> Blanchot, p. 194.

<sup>84</sup> Blanchot, p. 193.

<sup>85</sup> Blanchot, p. 193.

<sup>86</sup> Blanchot, p. 221.

has become ‘pervasive [. . .] as mood and method’ within literary studies today.<sup>87</sup> My investigation, though not principally considering the value or limitations of critique, is nonetheless informed by Felski’s broader efforts to offer an alternative to this hegemonic critical ‘mood’ by gesturing towards new and productive kinds of reading, to free up literary studies to ‘embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument’.<sup>88</sup> Felski’s approach builds on the approach of theorists such as Iser, noting how phenomenology’s ‘care or concern for phenomena’—its ‘preference for description over explanation’ and ‘willingness to attend rather than to analyze’—position it as a potential alternative to the ‘suspicious’ methods of critique.<sup>89</sup> She also, however, acknowledges the essential limitations of Iser’s formalised, structured conception of the reading process:

Much work in the phenomenology of reading [. . .] is a strangely bloodless affair, drained of affect and intensity. Interpretation is treated as a purely cerebral exercise, a question of filling in gaps, imposing schemas, and deciphering ambiguities, akin to doing a leisurely Sunday morning crossword puzzle. But what of that sudden manic surge of exegetical energy, the drawn-out agony of banging one’s head against an impervious wall of words followed by the bliss of that *aha!* moment when things fall into place? Reading—even academic reading—is a less dry and dispassionate activity than it is often made out to be.<sup>90</sup>

Felski points towards an alternative model of ‘postcritical reading’ which places us ‘in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible’, recognising the text’s ‘status as coactor: as something that makes a difference, that helps make things happen’.<sup>91</sup> In this, Felski positions our relationship with literary works as complex, personal, and fundamentally affective: interpretation is thus figured as a ‘powerful mode of attachment’:

Readers are not autonomous, self-contained, centers of meaning, but they are also not mere flotsam and jetsam tossed on the tides of social or linguistic forces that they are helpless to affect or comprehend. When they encounter texts, they do so in all their commonality and quirkiness; they mediate and are

---

<sup>87</sup> Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 1. In her investigation into the influence, and arguable limitations, of this ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (a phrase borrowed from Paul Ricoeur), Felski’s study can be situated within a wider critical conversation around the continued value and usefulness of ‘critique’, building on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s earlier discussion of ‘paranoid’ and ‘reparative’ modes of reading (‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You’, in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–51), and Bruno Latour’s questioning of whether the practice of critique has ‘run out of steam’ (Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern’, *Critical Inquiry*, 30.2 (2004), 225–48).

<sup>88</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 107.

<sup>90</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 107.

<sup>91</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 12.



in turn mediated, in both predictable and perplexing ways.<sup>92</sup>

While not following Felski's specific model of 'postcritical reading', my investigation builds on her conception of an 'affective hermeneutics',<sup>93</sup> a conception which situates her study within a wider critical effort to investigate the affective dimensions of the reading process—as, for example, in Marielle Macé's argument that the reading of literature is inextricably bound up with 'forms intrinsic to life itself, impulses, images, and ways of being that circulate between subjects and works, revealing, activating, and affecting them'.<sup>94</sup> This critical effort is perhaps traceable back to Susan Sontag's argument, at the conclusion of her 1996 essay 'Against Interpretation', for a mode of critical reading which, in attending to the 'luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are', allows us to 'recover our senses', creating the space for us to '*see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more', to 'make works of art [. . .] more, rather than less, real to us'—an approach which she finally, strikingly refers to as an 'erotics of art'.<sup>95</sup>

By drawing on these varying critical approaches to the question of how we read literature, my own enquiry aims to create the space to investigate—in all its complexities and contradictions—the specific mode of reading invoked by Wallace's 'unfinished' work. My fundamental argument is that the instances of incompleteness in Wallace's fiction demand from us a uniquely self-conscious (and unsettling) form of 'active reading' requiring the reader to negotiate with the text. I will seek to situate Wallace within a broader tradition of literary incompleteness, exploring how the use and incidence of incompleteness and failures in his fiction follow a trajectory established by earlier writers, including, especially, Beckett,<sup>96</sup> DeLillo,<sup>97</sup> and Kafka.<sup>98</sup> I will, however, also address how Wallace can equally be seen to break from the

---

<sup>92</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp. 175, 171.

<sup>93</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 178.

<sup>94</sup> Marielle Macé, 'Ways of Reading, Modes of Being', trans. by Marlon Jones, *New Literary History*, 44.2 (2013), 213–29 (p. 213).

<sup>95</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 3–14 (p. 14). It is perhaps significant to note that Wallace's personal library at the Harry Ransom Center includes a heavily annotated copy of Sontag's *Against Interpretation*.

<sup>96</sup> Beckett's writing notably directs itself towards 'the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express' (Samuel Beckett, *Proust, and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, 3rd edn (London: Calder Publications, 1969), p. 103).

<sup>97</sup> Peter Boxall argues that DeLillo's 'idiomatic, textured, and multireferential' novels are nonetheless 'driven by an investment in the possibilities of aesthetic silence', an investment inherited 'to an extent, from Beckett' (Boxall, 'DeLillo and Media Culture', in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, ed. by John N. Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 43–52 (p. 46)).

<sup>98</sup> Allen Thiher suggests that Kafka's frequently fragmentary or 'broken' works are defined by an underlying 'incompletion principle', an unfinished-ness felt in both formal and thematic terms' (Thiher, *Understanding Franz Kafka* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2018), p. 39).

aesthetics of incompleteness variously employed by these literary predecessors—primarily, I would argue, in the degree to which his (meta)fictional approach places reflexive focus on the reader's *felt* experience. Even if we resist taking Wallace's own articulation of his 'redemptive' fictional project at face value, it is nevertheless worth noting how his theorisations of the 'communicative' function of fiction are repeatedly framed in explicitly affective terms. In a 1993 interview, Wallace expresses hope that his work might have the capacity to 'make people less lonely. Or really to affect people', going on to assert that 'what fiction and poetry are doing is what they've been trying to do for two-thousand years: affect somebody, make somebody feel a certain way'.<sup>99</sup> It is in its engagement with the affective dimension of incompleteness, and giving rise to a complex, often uncomfortable readerly experience of negotiating textual or narrative unfinished-ness, that Wallace's writing stands out from that of his modernist (and postmodernist) precursors, and which makes contemporary, affectively-inclined theories of reading such as a Felski's so pertinent in exploring the kind of reading demanded by his work.

In this way, I want to consider how Wallace's fiction points us towards a contemporary conception of 'incomplete reading', an interpretative model which, beyond teaching us how to read his own, 'broken' fictions, also provokes a broader consideration of the complex, mysterious, and in some sense always 'incomplete' nature and practice of literary interpretation. While the 'blank spaces' of Wallace's writing offer us a self-consciously concrete manifestation of 'the incomplete', I would argue that their effect—at least in part—is to provoke us into a larger reflection on the implications of the incompleteness and indeterminacy present (in varying forms and degrees) in every work of fiction—the active, if inevitably circumscribed, work involved in the process of reading itself. This is not to suggest that all literary works demand the same level of readerly 'entanglement'—Wallace himself is acutely attuned to a distinction between the strategies of 'serious fiction' and the pacifying 'entertainment' offered by 'commercial art'<sup>100</sup>—but rather to find, across Wallace's fiction, a consistent concern with an incompleteness inherent to the reading process, a felt unfinished-ness which transcends, and to some extent collapses, (post)modernist distinctions between 'writerly' and 'readerly', 'open' and 'closed' texts. In its manifest incompleteness, and its persistent concern with exploring (and inviting us to explore) the readerly experience of this unfinished-ness, Wallace's writing works

---

<sup>99</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk' (1993), in *Conversations*, pp. 11–20 (pp. 16, 18).

<sup>100</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with McCaffery', p. 22, 33.

to gesture beyond itself, leading us to look with fresh eyes at the central, inescapable ‘blankness’ which sits at the heart of all literary texts, all literary interpretation.

Investigating the various forms of incompleteness found across Wallace’s fiction, I take an approach both chronological and thematic—tracing the development of his thinking over his career, but addressing in each chapter in turn a different facet of the incomplete as felt both in the individual text and, by extension, across Wallace’s oeuvre. Chapter 1 is concerned with Wallace’s own ‘incomplete reading’ of philosophical texts, using *The Broom of the System* to explore the ways in which his work is consistently driven by a ‘creative misreading’ of philosophies of language and interpersonal communication. Chapter 2 employs Wallace’s early short story collection *Girl with Curious Hair* as a lens through which to investigate Wallace’s literary intertexts, exploring how his self-conscious attempts to ‘move fiction forward’ are marked by an unavoidable unfinished-ness which works to interrupt and critique linear models of literary ‘progression’. Chapter 3 explores how *Infinite Jest*’s sheer *bigness* works to establish an essential tension between excess and incompleteness, between seeking panoramic ‘mastery’ and awareness of the impossibility of completing such an encyclopaedic project. Chapter 4 turns to Wallace’s late-career short story collections *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *Oblivion*, investigating a shift towards smallness, silence, and absence which, I argue, fundamentally alters our understanding of the ‘breaches’ in his writing. Finally, Chapter 5 concentrates on *The Pale King*, drawing together points from my previous chapters to establish a conception of ‘incomplete reading’, and confronting the central, inevitable question of how we can attempt to interpret a truly incomplete work.

### Coda

My investigation will, of course, be confronted with limitations and failures of its own. Wallace’s oeuvre is strikingly marked by concerns, ideas, and motifs which recur, develop, and mutate between texts: Hayes-Brady notes how ‘concerns that dominated Wallace’s later writing’ are ‘visible in embryonic form in his earliest work’.<sup>101</sup> Her thematically-organised study offers one viable way of addressing the complex, looping network of echoes and correspondences which characterise his oeuvre, which are difficult to elucidate in a purely chronological tour through Wallace’s novels and stories. Nevertheless, a book-by-book

---

<sup>101</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 15.

approach also holds rewards of its own, allowing us to attend to the varying ways in which incompleteness is manifested and explored in each of his published works, and, with this, the changes of shape, tone, and strategy which take place across Wallace's literary career. That it faces unavoidable limitations is perhaps only apt: in approaching Wallace's fiction, we are repeatedly forced to confront the awareness that any reading—and particularly any attempt to offer anything like a 'complete' critical account—will always necessarily 'fall short' in some way.

This thesis, then, is driven by a belief in the critical potential of *limits*: of paying attention to the inescapable shortcomings, failures, and incompleteness which serve as an unavoidable (and arguably necessary) aspect both literary readings and literary texts. The question of reading Wallace's fiction is, in 2019, one inevitably shaped by the question of shortcomings. Beyond the sense of felt unfinished-ness associated with the collective feeling that Wallace 'died with his work incomplete', having never truly 'hit his target',<sup>102</sup> recent years have seen greater scrutiny of the shortcomings of a different kind. Scholars have paid increasing attention to the limitations found in his fictional portrayals of women<sup>103</sup> and people of colour,<sup>104</sup> and his popular reception has been affected by critiques of the disproportionate whiteness/maleness of his readership (Alex Shephard has characterised his writing as 'the lingua franca of a certain subset of overeducated, usually wealthy, extremely self-serious (mostly) men'),<sup>105</sup> and, most recently, renewed discussion—in the wake of the #MeToo

---

<sup>102</sup> Max, 'The Unfinished', *The New Yorker*, 2 March 2009, para. 3

<<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/09/the-unfinished>> [accessed 17 January 2019].

<sup>103</sup> See, particularly, chapter 8 of Hayes-Brady's *Unspeakable Failures*; and Mary K. Holland, "'By Hirsute Author': Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58.1 (2017), 64–77.

<sup>104</sup> See Jorge Araya, 'Why the Whiteness?: Race in *The Pale King*', in *Critical Insights*, pp. 238–251; Thompson, 'Wallace and Race', in *Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, pp. 204–19.

<sup>105</sup> Alex Shephard, 'Neil Gorsuch Will Be Our First Lit Bro Supreme Court Justice', *New Republic*, 21 March 2017, para. 1 <<https://newrepublic.com/minutes/141498/neil-gorsuch-will-first-lit-bro-supreme-court-justice>> [accessed 31 May 2019]. See also Deirde Coyle's widely-shared article 'Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me', *Electric Literature*, 17 April 2017 <<https://electricliterature.com/men-recommend-david-foster-wallace-to-me/>> [accessed 13 May 2019].

movement—of Wallace’s personal history of abusive relationships with women.<sup>106</sup> The interpretative approach of Wallace’s readership is thus unavoidably shaped and informed by an awareness of these real problems. While they are not my primary subject, I intend to identify a mode of reading capable of acknowledging the wider shortcomings of Wallace’s life, work, and reception, and, in this, to identify that which is still compelling, affecting, or vital within his novels and stories.

In carrying out an extended reading of Wallace’s fiction, I aim to find a way to look (and read) *beyond* Wallace. In his 2015 survey of ‘Wallace studies’, Kelly concludes by arguing that

A scholarship that wants to pay genuine tribute to Wallace’s vision [. . .] also has the duty to move beyond it, to explore what the author—in his political, historical, cultural and aesthetic moment—could not quite see or say. In considering Wallace in this way, we can respond to resources in his texts that go beyond the limitations of his moment and can thereby begin to play the radical role that Wallace conceived for readers.<sup>107</sup>

Ultimately, I want to explore how we as readers still have the capacity to find something productive within the blank spaces and (sometimes very real) failures of Wallace’s fiction, to establish, in our self-consciously active work of interpretation, an understanding of our own reading which allows us to rethink the way we approach other literary texts in 21<sup>st</sup> century life. Looking beyond Wallace, my thesis endeavours to contribute to the current critical discussion around the nature, place, and uses of literary interpretation being carried out by critics such as Felski and Elizabeth Anker, the ‘rethinking of literary studies’—involving ‘new conceptions of literary value, of the critic’s interpretive labor, and of the public role of the humanities’—which, these writers identify as ‘currently taking place’.<sup>108</sup> The enduring power of Wallace’s fiction, I

---

<sup>106</sup> This recent discussion was primarily prompted by the testimony of the author Mary Karr, who was herself involved in an abusive romantic relationship with Wallace (detailed—if arguably uncomfortably briefly—within Max, *Every Love Story*). See Mary Karr, ‘Mary Karr, Author on Twitter: “Deeply Saddened by the Allegations against #JunoDiaz & I Support Every Woman Brave Enough to Speak. The Violence #DavidFosterWallace Inflicted on Me as a Single Mom Was Ignored by His Biographer & @NewYorker as ‘Alleged’ despite My Having Letters in His Hand. But DFW Was White.”’, *Twitter* <<https://twitter.com/marykarrlit/status/992545700004139008>> [accessed 13 May 2019]. For further discussion, see Megan Garber, ‘David Foster Wallace and the Dangerous Romance of Male Genius’, *The Atlantic*, 9 May 2018 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/05/the-world-still-spins-around-male-genius/559925/>> [accessed 31 May 2019]; Steve Paulson and Clare Hayes-Brady, ‘David Foster Wallace in the #MeToo Era: A Conversation with Clare Hayes-Brady’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 10 September 2018 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/david-foster-wallace-in-the-metoo-era-a-conversation-with-clare-hayes-brady/>> [accessed 13 May 2019].

<sup>107</sup> Kelly, ‘The Critical Reception’, p. 60.

<sup>108</sup> Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, eds., introduction to *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 1–30 (p. 2).

would suggest, lies at least in part in its capacity to point us towards new ways of reading, its power to remind us of the extent to which our interpretation of a literary work always involves a negotiation with an aspect of unfinished-ness. By investigating the subjective, felt experience of this ‘incomplete reading’, I will show how Wallace’s work tells us something essential about the uncertainty of reading in everyday life, the pervading aspects of unfinished-ness, and the unfinished modes of reading, demanded from us by the contemporary world.

## 1. 'The limits of my world': *The Broom of the System*

### 'An essentially shitty first book'

I wrote *Broom of the System* when I was very young. I mean, the first draft of that was my college thesis. There are parts of it that I think are good. But it's—I wince.<sup>1</sup>

In his 1996 interview with David Lipsky, Wallace reflects on his retrospective disappointment with his debut novel. For the Wallace of 1996 (following the publication of *Infinite Jest*) *The Broom of the System* (1987) is dismissible as an 'essentially shitty' piece of work, a novel which, despite showing evidence of 'some talent', betrays the 'wince'-inducing inexperience of its author.<sup>2</sup> In many respects, Wallace's disavowal of his early writing can be seen to have shaped the reception of his work: Hayes-Brady has identified a critical tendency to 'perceive Wallace's career in terms of a break, with *Jest* at the center and with *Broom* and the early work in general consigned to the sidelines'.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, scholarly discussions of *Broom* have inclined towards reading the novel as a formative, incomplete expression of Wallace's literary project: Matthew Luter has characterised *Broom* as an 'apprentice work', the product of a writer 'still figuring out what sort of writer he is going to be'.<sup>4</sup> There is some truth to these assessments: in its freewheeling, sophomoric, and sometimes self-indulgent humour, *Broom* betrays its origins as a 'college thesis' (a version of the novel was submitted as one of two undergraduate theses while Wallace was studying at Amherst College).<sup>5</sup> These qualities were noted in contemporary reviews: Michiko Kakutani critiqued the novel's predilection for 'superfluous verbal riffs [. . .] repetitious digressions, and nonsensical babbling that reads like out-takes from a stoned, late-night dormitory exchange'.<sup>6</sup> For Kakutani, *Broom*, while 'no mean achievement', presented 'only a shadow of what the author might accomplish'—a critique which has, to some degree, echoed through the novel's subsequent critical response.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Wallace, qtd. in Lipsky, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Wallace, qtd. in Lipsky, pp. 22, 34. See also Wallace's interview with McCaffery, where he reiterates his disappointment with *Broom*, admitting that 'there's a lot of stuff in that novel I'd like to reel back in and do better' (Wallace, 'Interview with McCaffery', p. 32).

<sup>3</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Luter, 'The *Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair*', in *Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, pp. 67–81 (p. 67).

<sup>5</sup> See Max, *Every Love Story*, ch. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Michiko Kakutani, 'Books of The Times; Life in Cleveland, 1990: Review of *The Broom of the System*', *New York Times*, 27 December 1986, section Books, para. 6

<<https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/27/books/books-of-the-times-life-in-cleveland-1990.html>> [accessed 18 June 2019].

<sup>7</sup> Kakutani, 'Review of *The Broom of the System*', para. 7.

Despite these imperfections, *Broom* nevertheless offers an invaluable jumping-off point for our exploration of Wallace's fiction. Even in its aspects of untidiness, Wallace's first novel is striking in introducing a range of ideas, motifs, and images which will go on to define his writing throughout his career. Reading *Broom* today, we are confronted with numerous anticipatory echoes of Wallace's later work, ranging from the general (in its obsessive exploration of the nature and limits of interpersonal communication and connection, *Broom* introduces concerns felt across all of Wallace's subsequent writing) to the weirdly specific (in a subplot concerning a mysterious baby food additive enabling infants to speak 'months, maybe years before they normally would have',<sup>8</sup> *Broom* bizarrely foreshadows the comparably mysterious, uncannily articulate 'fierce' infant who appears in the unfinished *Pale King*).<sup>9</sup> Hayes-Brady has suggested that *Broom* is a 'crucially important text' for 'understanding the trajectory of Wallace's career and the development of his guiding principles'.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, however, she goes on to suggest that

Its chief importance lies in its very clumsiness, in the visibility of its central concerns [. . .] and stylistic features for which Wallace is most famous, which awkwardly and obviously permeate that first novel.<sup>11</sup>

For Hayes-Brady, it is these aspects of 'clumsiness' which make *Broom* so significant: in this early work, Wallace's central concerns and stylistic strategies are laid bare, in terms more visible than anywhere else in his writing career. Building on this, I am particularly interested in what *Broom*'s 'clumsiness' can tell us about Wallace's *reading*. To some extent, the awkward qualities of Wallace's pre-*Infinite Jest* fiction—both in *Broom* and in his subsequent story collection *Girl with Curious Hair* (1987)—are manifested in its uniquely self-conscious, anxious, and visible engagements with a range of intertexts: Luter notes that *Broom* and *Girl* are 'more defined by their influences (both literary and philosophical) and Wallace's careful responses to them' than any of his subsequent work,<sup>12</sup> and we see this reflected in the wealth of criticism exploring, for example, *Broom*'s stylistic debts to Pynchon, or *Girl*'s ambivalent

---

<sup>8</sup> Wallace, *Broom of the System*, p. 149. Further references to *Broom* in this chapter will be placed in parentheses in the text.

<sup>9</sup> See Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 389.

<sup>10</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 66, emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> Luter, p. 67.



engagement with work of John Barth.<sup>13</sup> Moving beyond the identification of these key points of influence, however, I want to explore how the ‘clumsy’ intertextual engagements of these early works tell us something about how Wallace reads, about the particular kind of intertextual and interpretative activity enacted—and, arguably modelled for us—by Wallace’s fiction. The first two chapters of this thesis will thus investigate the nature of Wallace’s intertextual ‘readings’, focusing firstly on his engagement with philosophical texts in *Broom*, and secondly on his engagement with the literary texts in *Girl*, showing how the uniquely ‘awkward’ readings offered by these formative works offer us a reflexive foundation for understanding our own interpretative approach to Wallace’s fictional oeuvre as a whole.

### ‘INTERPRET-ME’

I thought of David as a very talented young philosopher with a writing hobby, and did not realize that he was instead one of the most talented fiction writers of his generation who had a philosophical hobby.<sup>14</sup>

In his memoir relating the experience of teaching Wallace, Jay Garfield recalls how, as a university student, Wallace’s interest in writing fiction was matched by a concurrent commitment to philosophy: significantly, alongside his first draft of *Broom*, Wallace submitted a second thesis on the technical philosophy of Richard Taylor and the question of fatalism.<sup>15</sup> While Wallace’s interests eventually shifted towards fiction writing as a primary pursuit, the sustained influence of his early philosophical study can be felt throughout his career: from Gerhard Schtitt’s metaphysical conception of the ‘infinite roots’ of tennis as attempt to ‘vanquish and transcend the limited self’ in *Jest*,<sup>16</sup> to Wallace’s consideration of the ethical implications of shellfish consumption in ‘Consider the Lobster’,<sup>17</sup> to ‘Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature’’s titular allusion to Richard Rorty.<sup>18</sup> Critics have consistently investigated the

---

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Kakutani’s assertion that *Broom* ‘will remind readers of *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon’ (‘Review of *Broom of the System*’, para. 2), or Boswell’s identification of the ‘number of striking similarities’ between *Broom* and *Lot 49* (*Understanding*, p. 51). For *Girl*’s complex engagement with Barth, see chapter 2 of this thesis.

<sup>14</sup> Jay Garfield, ‘David Foster Wallace as Student: A Memoir’, in David Foster Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, ed. by Stephen M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 219–221 (p. 221).

<sup>15</sup> Following Wallace’s death, this thesis was published as ‘Richard Taylor’s “Fatalism” and the Semantics of Physical Modality’, in *Fate, Time, and Language*. For more on Wallace’s early philosophical study, see Max, *Every Love Story*.

<sup>16</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> Wallace, ‘Consider the Lobster’, in *Consider the Lobster*, p. 235–254.

<sup>18</sup> Wallace, ‘Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature’, in *Oblivion*, pp. 182–9.

philosophical dimensions of his writing.<sup>19</sup> While some commentators have approached Wallace as a philosopher in his own right,<sup>20</sup> much of this scholarship has been dedicated to exploring the philosophical encounters offered by Wallace's fiction: Hayes-Brady has suggested that, for Wallace, philosophy and literature 'worked in tandem, with philosophy articulating questions, and fiction offering scope within which to dramatize, embody, or otherwise ventilate these issues'.<sup>21</sup> In this chapter, I will further explore the complex, shifting, and often unstable philosophical encounters found in Wallace's fiction, considering the ways in which his intertextual 'readings' of philosophy work to inform our own interpretative responses to his work.

In *The Broom of the System*, we are confronted with Wallace's most explicit fictional engagement with philosophy. James Ryerson has suggested that, as a work written 'when his own philosophical efforts were most intense', *Broom* stakes a claim to be Wallace's 'most philosophically intriguing text': this is borne out in the novel's direct engagement with abstract theoretical questions around the nature and limits of language.<sup>22</sup> Even when compared with Wallace's own subsequent body of work, *Broom* stands as a particularly stark example of an 'INTERPRET-ME' fiction, a novel which reflexively directs the theoretical terms by which it is read. Significantly, Wallace introduces his conception of the 'INTERPRET-ME' novel in a review of another text deeply grounded in philosophy: David Markson's 1988 experimental novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*.<sup>23</sup> Markson's text is one fundamentally indebted to and concerned with the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein: approaching the novel, we are everywhere pointed towards Wittgenstein's work—and particularly the early philosophy of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—as a necessary 'frame' for our reading.<sup>24</sup> In Wallace's assessment, this reflexive philosophical engagement works to bring Wittgenstein's philosophy

---

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Lance Olsen, 'Termite Art, or Wallace's Wittgenstein', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13.2 (1993), 199–215; Allard den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb, eds., *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Stephen M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert, eds., *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> James Ryerson, 'Introduction: A Head That Throbbled Heartlike: The Philosophical Mind of David Foster Wallace', in *Fate, Time, and Language*, pp. 1–33.

<sup>23</sup> David Markson, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by Charles Kay Ogden (London: Routledge, 1922).

to life: Markson's novel, he argues, succeeds in 'transposing W's intellectual conundra into the piquant qualia of lived, albeit bizarrely lived, experience', offering a concrete, imaginative rendering of the 'very bleak mathematical world' established through the 'abstract argument' of the *Tractatus*' text.<sup>25</sup>

Like *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, *Broom* is a work self-consciously framed in terms of its confrontation with, and animation of, Wittgenstein's philosophies of language. Boswell has argued that Wittgenstein's presence is 'felt everywhere' through the novel, and we see this in its numerous allusions to the philosopher: from the fact that one of its characters is introduced as a former 'student of Wittgenstein' at Cambridge in the twenties (p. 63), to its references and jokes revolving around Wittgensteinian concepts such as 'language-games', 'family resemblances', and 'private languages', to the title itself.<sup>26</sup> In many respects, Wallace, like Markson, can be seen to reflexively position Wittgenstein's philosophy as a necessary frame, an unavoidable point of theoretical reference, directing our interpretative responses to the text: indeed, Wittgenstein has been cited and dissected in practically every piece of criticism on the novel, with Hayes-Brady suggesting that his influence has become 'almost too commonplace to investigate'.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the question of *how* the novel makes use of Wittgenstein is less straightforwardly clear: Ryerson notes that, though the book is 'clearly supposed to be "about" Wittgenstein's philosophy', it is 'not obvious at first in *what* way'.<sup>28</sup> Wallace's review of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*—notably written three years after the publication of *Broom*—is intriguing in its implicit positioning of Markson's novel as offering a more successful version of what his own debut was trying to achieve: Ryerson suggests that Wallace felt that 'Markson's novel had succeeded in uniting literature and philosophy in a way that he, in *Broom*, had tried but failed to do'.<sup>29</sup> We can see how Wallace's analysis of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*—and, in particular, his praise for Markson's exploration of 'the consequences, for persons, of the

---

<sup>25</sup> Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum', p. 76.

<sup>26</sup> The title is, as Boswell has noted, a 'complex allusion to Wittgenstein' (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 23): the 'broom of the system' refers to Wittgenstein's use, in *Investigations* I §60, of the image of a broom to figure the fundamental intricacy of the statements of language: when we use the word 'broom', are we referring to both the stick and the brush at once? And which part is more essential to our concept of what a 'broom' is?

<sup>27</sup> For further analysis of the novel's references to Wittgenstein, see particularly Boswell, *Understanding*, ch. 2; Hayes-Brady, 'The Book, the Broom and the Ladder: Philosophical Groundings in the work of David Foster Wallace', in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, pp. 24–36, and *Unspeakable Failures*.

<sup>28</sup> Ryerson, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Ryerson, p. 22.

*practice of theory*’—offers us a retrospective starting point for our investigation into the attempts at philosophical ‘reading’ presented within *Broom*.<sup>30</sup>

### ‘Everything that is the case’

To a certain degree, *Broom* can be seen to run parallel to *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* in its interrogation of the felt, human implications of Wittgenstein’s early philosophy of language—the question of what it would actually be like to ‘live in a *Tractatusized* world’.<sup>31</sup> In his introduction to Wittgenstein’s work, Anthony Kenny asserts that Wittgenstein’s ‘major philosophical concern throughout his life’ was with ‘the nature of language and its relation to the world’.<sup>32</sup> In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein offers a highly structured, logically-organised conception of this language/world relationship, beginning with the famous dictum: ‘The world is everything that is the case’.<sup>33</sup> For the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, the world, when properly analysed according to the rules of logic, ‘divides into facts’: ‘the world’ is itself understood as a ‘totality of facts’, a collection of fundamental, discrete ‘states of affairs’ which cumulatively determine everything which ‘is the case, and also all that is not the case’.<sup>34</sup> It is in the context of this factually-constituted conception of the world that Wittgenstein outlines his ‘picture theory’ of meaning, a theory which Kenny succinctly summarises thus:

According to this theory, language consists of propositions which picture the world. Propositions are the perceptible expressions of thoughts, and thoughts are logical pictures of facts [. . .]<sup>35</sup>

In the philosophy of the *Tractatus*, the words and sentences of language are understood as direct representations (pictures or models) of the world. Taken as a whole, language offers a ‘model of reality’, a comprehensive, totalising mirror image of the ‘facts’ which constitute the world.<sup>36</sup>

While Wallace admired the terse, poetic formal clarity of Wittgenstein’s early work (he

<sup>30</sup> Wallace, ‘The Empty Plenum’, pp. 78.

<sup>31</sup> Wallace, ‘The Empty Plenum’, p. 76.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Kenny, *Wittgenstein*, revised edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 1.2, 1.1, 1.12. In Ogden’s 1922 translation of the *Tractatus*, these fundamental constituent parts (*Sachverhalten* in Wittgenstein’s original German) are translated as ‘atomic facts’: the alternate (and potentially clearer) phrase ‘states of affairs’ is offered in Pears and McGuinness’s later translation (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961)). While Pears and McGuinness’ translation of the *Tractatus* is often considered to be more accurate overall, Wallace himself exclusively used the Ogden translation when quoting from Wittgenstein’s work: in this chapter, I will thus—unless expressly stated—refer primarily to Ogden’s translation.

<sup>35</sup> Kenny, pp. 3–4.

<sup>36</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 2.12.

remarked in a 1992 letter to Lance Olsen that the first statement of the *Tractatus* was one of the ‘most beautiful opening lines in Western Lit.’)<sup>37</sup> his own reading of the *Tractatus*’ philosophy—as articulated most explicitly in his Markson essay and his interview with McCaffery—is profoundly troubled by the implications of Wittgenstein’s notion of a world ‘composed only & entirely’ of ‘logically discrete facts that have no intrinsic connection to one another’.<sup>38</sup> In particular, Wallace suggests that Wittgenstein’s ‘picture theory’, when taken to its logical conclusion, carries the implication of a ‘tragic fall. The loss of the whole external world’:

The *Tractatus*’s picture theory of meaning presumes that the only possible relation between language and the world is denotive, referential. In order for language both to be meaningful and to have some connection to reality, words like *tree* and *house* have to be like little pictures, representations of real trees and houses. Mimesis. But nothing more. Which means we can know and speak of nothing more than little mimetic pictures. Which divides us, metaphysically and forever, from the external world.<sup>39</sup>

The *Tractatus*’ pictorial language leaves the speaker imprisoned *behind* language, unable to truly connect with the outside world (or with other people): ‘the individual person with her language is trapped in here, with the world out there, and never the twain shall meet’.<sup>40</sup> More disturbingly, meanwhile, there is ‘no iron guarantee the pictures truly *are* mimetic’, no way of determining whether language’s pictorial ‘mirror’ offers a truly clear or complete representation of the outside world.<sup>41</sup> This suggestion finally points, Wallace argues, towards the possibility of solipsism: the view, as summarised by Michael Morris, that ‘only the self (“solus ipse”) exists: nothing but the self is real’.<sup>42</sup>

Turning to *Broom*, we find this philosophical anxiety articulated and interrogated most clearly in the character of Rick Vigorous. Throughout the novel, Rick—‘Editor, Reader, Administrator’ and ‘All-Around Literary Presence’ at ‘Frequent and Vigorous Publishing, Inc’ (p. 43), and older romantic partner of *Broom*’s protagonist Lenore Beadsman—is obsessively tortured by the *Tractatus*-informed fear that he is cut off from the world (and people) external to

<sup>37</sup> Wallace, letter to Olsen, qtd. in Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> Wallace, ‘The Empty Plenum’, p. 88.

<sup>39</sup> McCaffery, Wallace, p. 44.

<sup>40</sup> McCaffery, Wallace, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> McCaffery, Wallace, p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Morris, *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Wittgenstein and the Tractatus* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 263–4. Wallace’s persistent anxiety over the possibility of solipsism in his fiction has been addressed and explored by numerous critics: Ryerson, for example, suggests that ‘solipsism, sometimes discussed as a doctrine but also evoked as a metaphor for isolation and loneliness, pervades Wallace’s writing’ (Ryerson, p. 27). See also Patrick Horn, ‘Does Language Fail Us? Wallace’s Struggle with Solipsism’, in *Gesturing Towards Reality*, pp. 245–270.

him, an anxiety manifested most strongly in terms of his romantic relationship with Lenore. In an early chapter, he laments that he ‘must in the final analysis remain part of the world that is external to and other from Lenore Beadsman’ a fact which is for him a ‘source of profound grief’ (p. 60). The source of Rick’s anxiety is, at least in part, figured in comically physical, bodily terms: Rick’s insecurity is intimately bound up with his constant awareness of the fact of his tiny penis.<sup>43</sup> In comparison with ‘those who dwell deep, deep within the ones they love, drink from the soft cup at the creamy lake at the center of the Object of Passion’, Rick is consumed by the fear that his physical shortcomings mean he is ‘fated forever only to intuit the presence of deep recesses while I poke my nose, as it were, merely into the foyer of the Great House of Love, agitate briefly, and make a small mess on the doormat’ (p. 60). Beyond this bodily separation, Rick’s anxiety is also figured in linguistic terms: as Boswell has noted, Rick is ‘tirelessly, hysterically articulate’, seeking to ‘fill with *words* the enormous gap left by his small penis’.<sup>44</sup> In this respect, Rick’s feelings of separation from Lenore serve as a comically concretised manifestation of the ‘tragic fall’ which Wallace reads in the *Tractatus*: Rick cannot escape the feeling that he is trapped *behind* his language, cut off—physically and metaphysically—from the external world.

Significantly, Rick’s attempts to fill this ‘gap’ repeatedly take the form of fictional narratives: over the course of the novel, Rick, in his position as editor of a literary magazine, tells Lenore a series of stories-within-stories which—while ostensibly drawn from the *Frequent Review*’s submissions pile—all read suspiciously like fictionalised versions of his and Lenore’s relationship (albeit ones skewed by Rick’s own neurotic anxieties and preoccupations). In many respects, Rick’s narrative efforts to bridge the gap between him and Lenore offer a literalised version of Wallace’s own conception—as articulated in later essays and interviews—of fiction as an ‘act of communication between one human and another’, a means of establishing a meaningful, dialogic ‘connection’ between author and reader.<sup>45</sup> In the case of Rick’s stories, however, we are faced with repeated examples of incomplete, inadequate fictional communication. Even as he attempts to use them to ‘connect’ with Lenore, Rick’s stories are

---

<sup>43</sup> The name ‘Rick’ can perhaps be read as a version of ‘Prick’, albeit a version which is, like Rick himself, essentially *shortened*. For more discussion of *Broom*’s use of comic names (and the way these names invoke the influence of Thomas Pynchon), see Boswell, *Understanding*, and Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*.

<sup>44</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 37.

<sup>45</sup> Wallace, ‘Greatly Exaggerated’, p. 144.

beset by unavoidable limitations: from their tendency towards cliché and hackneyed expression (there is a running gag about Rick's fondness for the phrase 'grinned wryly' (pp. 123, 164, 335, 350, 351, 352, 435) which culminates in Lenore questioning 'Who grins wryly? Nobody grins wryly, at all, except in stories' (p. 335)), to their frequent descent into transparent wish-fulfilment (in the extracts from the notes for his 'Fieldbinder Collection', his alter-ego Monroe Fieldbinder is characterised by an 'enormous sex-organ' (p. 158)). When Rick later gives Lenore a finished Fieldbinder story to read (titled 'Love', and presented as an anonymous submission to the magazine), she dismisses it as 'artificial. Like the kid who wrote it was trying too hard' (p. 335), asserting that 'that thing wasn't even good enough in my opinion to have any effect on me, good or bad, at all' (p. 337).

This sense of limitation is, for Rick, one arguably encoded within the act of storytelling: while Rick's stories are presented as attempts to connect with Lenore, there is always the parallel suggestion that, in framing these attempts as fiction, Rick only ever achieves a compromised, incomplete form of 'communication'. Rick asserts that 'telling stories that are not my own is at this point what I do, after all. With Lenore I am completely and entirely myself' (p. 74)—the irony being that Rick, in rewriting his and Lenore's relationship as a series of fictional narratives, is fundamentally *not* himself with her. Even if, as is suggested, he is the author of these stories, they are still at some level not 'his own'. This suggestion comes to a head towards the end of *Broom*, as Rick, having taken Lenore out into the novel's fictional 'Great Ohio Desert', demands that she 'implore me for a story' (p. 422). As the scene progresses, Rick—to Lenore's increasing frustration—offers a final, fictionalised account of their (now collapsing) relationship, via a story about 'the most phenomenally successful theoretical dentist of the twentieth century' (p. 423). While Lenore questions why they can't 'just have a talk without you pretending it's something else' (p. 438), Rick insists that 'the issues here can be treated and perhaps even resolved in the context of the story I have in mind' (p. 423). Here, storytelling is positioned as an innately broken mode of communication: far from establishing a meaningful author/reader dialogue, Rick's narrative is one-sided, a futile attempt to assert monologic authorial control over Lenore and their relationship. Rick's narrative eventually converges with reality as he pathetically attempts to literalise this 'connection', handcuffing himself and Lenore together ('We are now joined, my center and reference! In negation and discipline! Our bodies are husks!' (p. 440))—an action directly mirroring the

characters in his story. Rick's attempts to collapse the metaphysical gap between Lenore and him are brought—with comic abruptness—back to the realm of the physical: confronted with the impotence of language (or fiction) as a means of communicating, he attempts to establish a literalised connection between self and other. Through Rick, we find Wallace using *Broom* to interrogate the felt implications of the *Tractatus*'s austere, logical philosophy of language. In his obsessive, failed attempts at 'communicative' story-making, Rick leads us to consider both the limits of language and—more specifically—the limits of Wallace's own idealised conception of fiction as a 'mode of *communication*', the extent to which any attempt at fictional 'connection' will, if we take the philosophy of the *Tractatus* seriously, always fall short.<sup>46</sup>

### 'I don't know my way about'

We can see, then, how the strategies underpinning *Broom* anticipate those which Wallace praises in his review of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*: like Markson, Wallace is concerned with exploring the human consequences of the '*practice of theory*', using fiction to transpose the 'bleak mathematical world' of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* into 'lived, albeit bizarrely lived, experience'.<sup>47</sup> Wallace's novel departs from Markson's, however, in the degree to which it simultaneously articulates the limitations of this philosophical 'system': where *Wittgenstein's Mistress* clearly positions the *Tractatus* as a primary philosophical foundation for its narrative, *Broom* invites us to think beyond this singular 'framing', setting Rick's early *Tractatus*-inflected understanding of language and the world against a series of alternate, often conflicting, lines of philosophical enquiry. Indeed, considered as a whole, *Broom* can equally be seen to respond to the very different philosophy outlined in Wittgenstein's late work, the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).<sup>48</sup> The *Investigations* offer a stark contrast with Wittgenstein's early work: the *Tractatus*'s terse propositions are replaced by a flowing, discursive style, while the attempts of the *Tractatus* to delineate a structured, 'complete' account of language give way to what Marie McGinn refers to as 'a concern with the detailed workings of the concrete, complex, multifarious and indeterminate phenomenon of language-in-use'.<sup>49</sup> Central to this shift in

<sup>46</sup> Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum', p. 83.

<sup>47</sup> Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum', p. 76.

<sup>48</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd edn (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968).

<sup>49</sup> Marie McGinn, *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 5.



method and focus is the abandoning of the *Tractatus*'s 'picture theory': in the *Investigations*, language is imagined not as an abstract system of direct representation, but rather as something complex, shifting, and difficult to pin down—McGinn asserts that 'instead of approaching language as a system of signs with meaning, we are prompted to think about it *in situ*, embedded in the lives of those who speak it'.<sup>50</sup> It is this move away from what Wallace refers to as 'the ideal abstraction of math-logic' and towards 'ordinary day-to-day language in all its general wooliness & charm' which leads Wittgenstein to the notion of the 'language-game'.<sup>51</sup> Wittgenstein asserts that 'the term "language-game" is meant to bring to prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life'.<sup>52</sup> Throughout the *Investigations*, language is figured as an activity carried out between persons, a series of games with rules determined by the communities who play them, and by the context in which they are played. In many ways, this conception of language as a 'game' can be read as directly refuting the solipsistic possibility of being trapped *behind* language which so troubles Rick. The *Investigations* suggests that, far from being something which separates us from the outside world, language is dependent on our communicating with those around us, an idea which forms the basis of its famous attack on the possibility of 'private languages'. For the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*, the notion of a language which is internal, comprehensible only to one's self, is nonsensical: language is too bound up with the social activities of life to exist as anything other than a form of communication between people. It is this suggestion which leads Wallace—in his interview with McCaffery—to characterise the *Investigations* as 'the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made': if language is a fundamentally social activity, then the possibility that we might be trapped inside our own heads, unable to communicate with the external world, has been rendered impossible.<sup>53</sup>

As with his idiosyncratic reading of the *Tractatus*, however, Wallace finds that, when taken to its logical conclusion, the philosophy of the *Investigations* carries its own set of equally disturbing real-world implications:

Wittgenstein argues that for language even to be possible, it must always be a function of relationships between persons (that's why he spends so much time arguing against the possibility of a 'private language'). So he makes language

---

<sup>50</sup> McGinn, p. 44.

<sup>51</sup> Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum', pp. 108–9.

<sup>52</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §23.

<sup>53</sup> McCaffery, Wallace, p. 44.

dependent on human community, but unfortunately we're still stuck with the idea that there is this world of referents out there that we can never really join or know because we're stuck in here, *in language*, even if we're at least all in here together.<sup>54</sup>

While the later Wittgenstein's conception of communal 'language-games' removes the possibility that we might be solipsistically trapped *behind* language, it leaves Wallace with the unsettling suggestion that we might be collectively trapped *inside* it. For the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*, we can never attain the necessary distance from language required to fully understand either its structures or its relation to the world: the problems of philosophy are all figured as variations on the statement 'I don't know my way about'.<sup>55</sup> It is this sense of being caught *within* language which Wallace finds so disconcerting:

If I were separate from language, if I could somehow detach from it and climb up and look down on it, get the lay of the land so to speak, I could study it 'objectively', take it apart, deconstruct it, know its operations and boundaries and deficiencies. But that's not how things are. I'm *in* it. We're *in* language.<sup>56</sup>

For Wallace, the *Investigations* gestures towards a reality in which we are unable to discern where the language-game ends and 'the world' begins, a reality which might consequently be seen to exist for us *as* language: he argues that Wittgenstein, having died 'right on the edge of explicitly treating reality as linguistic instead of ontological', can be considered the 'real architect of the postmodern trap'.<sup>57</sup>

Within *Broom*, this philosophical anxiety is articulated primarily through the character of Lenore, who throughout the novel is troubled by the feeling that she has 'no real existence, except for what she said and did and perceived and et cetera, and that these were, it seemed at such times, not really under her control' (p. 66). In contrast with Rick's *Tractatus*-informed fear that he is trapped behind the language of his stories, Lenore is plagued by the suspicion that her very existence is caught *within* the systems of language, that there is no reliable way of knowing if there *is* a reality external to language at all. In a 'rap session' with her eccentric therapist Dr Jay, Lenore articulates her anxiety over the possibility that 'all that really exists of my life is what can be said about it', that, there is, perhaps, 'no such thing as extra-linguistic efficacy, extra-linguistic *anything*' (pp. 119–21). Lenore's ontological anxiety is traced explicitly back to the philosophy of the *Investigations*: her conception of a wholly linguistic reality originates, we

<sup>54</sup> McCaffery, Wallace, p. 44, emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §123.

<sup>56</sup> McCaffery, Wallace, p. 45.

<sup>57</sup> McCaffery, Wallace, p. 45.

learn, from her indoctrination in the basics of Wittgenstein's late philosophy by her great-grandmother (significantly, and confusingly, also named 'Lenore Beadsman'). It is via the influence of 'Gramma' Beadsman—a former student of Wittgenstein's who keeps a signed copy of the *Investigations* 'with her all the time' (p. 40)—that Lenore has become convinced that there is no tangible difference between language and life, that 'the living is the telling, that there's nothing going on with me that isn't either told or tellable' (p. 119). In Lenore, we find Wallace animating and concretising the troubling implications which he finds in Wittgenstein's late work, the unsettling felt experience of a world defined by a series of complex, intersecting, and inescapable language-games. In the face of her ontological insecurity, Lenore is left with 'feelings of disorientation and identity-confusion and lack of control' (p. 61), feelings which inevitably affect her relationships with those around her. Even from Rick's perspective, Lenore is described as having

The quality of a sort of game about her. [. . .] Lenore soundlessly invites one to play a game consisting of involved attempts to find out the game's own rules. [. . .] The rules of the game are Lenore, and to play is to be played. (p. 72)

Lenore's relationship with Rick is figured in terms of a late-Wittgensteinian language-game, with both parties' attempts to meaningfully 'connect' with each other reduced to the status of an abstract linguistic interaction, shaped by grammatical 'rules'.

Here, again, this central instance of 'identity confusion' is rendered in self-consciously literary terms. Significantly, Lenore's crisis of identity arises not only from a feeling that she might exist only as a linguistic construct, but also from the sense that she is somehow specifically *fictional*. Discussing her anxieties with Dr Jay, Lenore compares her existence to that of a character in one of Rick's stories:

The lady's life is the story, and if the story says, 'The fat pretty woman was convinced her life was real', then she is. Except what she doesn't know is that her life isn't hers. It's there for a reason. To make a point or give a smile, whatever. She's not even produced, she's educed. She's there for a reason.  
(p. 122)

It is this feeling of being 'educed' rather than 'produced' which so disturbs Lenore: beyond her sense of her own unreality, she also feels that her life 'isn't hers', that she is playing a part in *someone else's* story, and thus that her own thoughts and actions are out of her control. When questioned by Jay as to whether she feels she owes her existence to an external 'author' figure, Lenore argues that her 'character' is controlled by the system of language itself: 'The telling makes its own reasons. Gramma says any telling automatically becomes a kind of system that

controls everybody involved' (p. 122). Throughout *Broom*, we find Lenore guided by systems beyond her control, 'used' in a vast language-game (or number of intersecting language-games) which she does not, and cannot hope to, understand.

*Broom*'s central irony—what Wallace refers to as its 'funny little poststructural gag'—comes from our readerly knowledge that Lenore *is* fictional: she is, in the end, 'a character in a story who's terribly afraid that she's really nothing more than a character in a story'.<sup>58</sup> By drawing our attention to Lenore's fictionality, the novel invites us to question—as Lenore does with the 'fat pretty lady' in Rick's story—whether Lenore's existence can reliably be considered any less 'real' than our own. Wallace draws out of the *Investigations* a suggestion that, in its incomprehensible intersecting language games, our 'real world' might reasonably be considered to share the same basic qualities as a work of fiction. In this, we are thus presented with a counterpoint to the suggestion—evoked in Rick's failed attempts at connection-through-storytelling—that fiction can only ever provide a compromised incomplete mode of communication. If our world is, as Wallace's reading of the *Investigations* suggests, one which is fundamentally linguistic, then a work of fiction is no more or less flawed a means of communicating than any other—Lenore herself feels that, in their explicit fictionality, stories are in fact 'more honest, somehow' (p. 120). Nevertheless, this argument offers only partial comfort: while no more limited than other forms of linguistic communication, fiction, understood in this way, still denies the possibility of meaningful interpersonal 'connection'. Following Lenore's late-Wittgensteinian conception of language and its relationship with reality, fiction is afflicted by the same failures which affect all kinds of language: we are still trapped within the 'game', denied contact with an extra-linguistic world.

### The Limits of the System

In Rick and Lenore's competing anxieties, then, we are faced with a central conflict between Wittgenstein's early and late philosophies. Crucially, by juxtaposing these competing philosophical 'systems', *Broom* establishes an unresolved tension between the two, forcing us to recognise the inherent limitations of both. Considered alongside each other, the philosophies of the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* are positioned as essentially incomplete models for interpreting the relationship between language and the world—and thus, with this, as inevitably

---

<sup>58</sup> McCaffery, Wallace, *Conversations*, p. 41.

inadequate ‘frames’ for our own interpretation of Wallace’s novel. Even as it apparently establishes itself as a self-conscious ‘INTERPRET-ME’ text, *Broom* equally works to resist univocal interpretation: unlike Markson in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, Wallace denies the possibility of finding a coherent theoretical system through which to orient our reading of his work. In this, *Broom* invites us to consider more widely the limitations inherent in any unitary model of philosophical reading—either of literary texts or of the world more generally. Faced with *Broom*’s arrangement of juxtaposed, competing philosophies, we are confronted by the suggestion that each of these posited interpretative systems is inevitably and necessarily incomplete.

This suggestion is only compounded when we take into account the extent to which Wallace’s own readings of Wittgenstein, in turn, offer a comparably ‘incomplete’ interpretation of these philosophical texts. Wallace’s intertextual engagements with both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*—as outlined both in *Broom* and in his discussions in the Markson essay and the McCaffery interview—are both built on a strikingly idiosyncratic, skewed approach to Wittgenstein’s philosophy: Ryerson has asserted that Wallace’s ‘explications of Wittgenstein’s philosophy are not always convincing or strictly true’,<sup>59</sup> while Horn has explored in detail how Wallace ‘overlooked the distinctive way in which Wittgenstein approached the question of solipsism, leading Wallace to a conclusion that Wittgenstein himself would have been unable to make sense of’.<sup>60</sup> Turning again to the *Tractatus*, we can see how the early Wittgenstein’s treatment of solipsism is more complex and ambiguous than Wallace’s reading would suggest: Morris argues that, while the *Tractatus*’s philosophy does suggest a kind of solipsism, ‘it is not clear [. . .] that this is quite Wittgenstein’s view’.<sup>61</sup> When Wittgenstein addresses the problem of solipsism in the *Tractatus*, it is to suggest obliquely that ‘what solipsism *means*, is quite correct, only it cannot be *said*, but it shows itself’.<sup>62</sup> Wittgenstein argues that, if there is truth in the notion of solipsism, it is not a truth which can be expressed through language, and thus not a truth which can be comprehended in any definite way. Thus, while *Tractatus* does not deny the possibility of solipsism, it asserts that this possibility is meaningless in terms of everyday life. While our engagement with the world may be delimited by our use of language, this language is

---

<sup>59</sup> Ryerson, p. 32.

<sup>60</sup> Horn, p. 246.

<sup>61</sup> Morris, p. 263.

<sup>62</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.62.

understood as a *direct and complete* representation of reality (it is this notion which allows Wittgenstein to argue that ‘solipsism strictly carried out coincides with pure realism’)—a point which renders moot Rick’s neurotic fears of being trapped *behind* language, ‘metaphysically and forever’ divided from the external world.<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, *Broom*’s engagement with the *Investigations* is arguably built on a comparable misreading, with Wallace’s depiction of the later Wittgenstein as a ‘mad crackpot genius [. . .] who believed that everything was words’ (p. 73), offering a notable distortion of the *Investigations*’ argument. While Wittgenstein does assert the centrality of language-games in life, he never goes so far as to deny the possibility of engaging with a concrete, extralinguistic reality: McGinn notes that the very concept of the ‘language-game’ is introduced to articulate how ‘language functions within the active, practical lives of speakers, that its use is inextricably bound up with the non-linguistic behaviour which constitutes its natural environment’.<sup>64</sup> For the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*, language can only ever exist as something bound up with actions and relationships in a world which, while undeniably *shaped* by our use of language, is never conceived of in purely linguistic terms—an argument which, again, works to render irrelevant the feelings of ontological insecurity expressed by Lenore throughout *Broom*.

These aspects of misreading tell us something significant about how Wallace employs and engages with philosophical ideas through his fiction. Wallace’s readings of Wittgenstein are unmistakably filtered through his own distinctive perspective, reoriented towards a series of concerns—with the threat of solipsism, the limitations of language, and the (always qualified) possibility of fiction as a ‘mode of communication’—that will remain central throughout his career. In his interview with McCaffery, Wallace makes notable reference to Wittgenstein as a ‘real artist’: in *Broom*, we find Wallace appropriating Wittgenstein’s philosophical texts not in terms of a coherent or definitive series of guiding principles, but rather as examples of a kind of ‘artwork’, open to creative re- or mis-interpretation.<sup>65</sup> Hayes-Brady has commented on Wallace’s ‘often utilitarian approach’ to ‘the work of other philosophers, taking what is useful

---

<sup>63</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.64.

<sup>64</sup> McGinn, p. 43.

<sup>65</sup> In his review of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, Wallace praises Markson’s comparable creative misappropriations of the *Tractatus*, asserting that, in the numerous instances where the novel’s protagonist Kate ‘recalls lines & concepts incorrectly, her errors serve the ends [. . .] of both original art and original interpretation’ (‘The Empty Plenum’, p. 77).

and discarding what is not' in the construction of his own novels and stories.<sup>66</sup> For Hayes-Brady, Wallace's fiction is characterisable not in terms of its 'adherence to' the work of any philosopher(s), but rather in its 'encounters with them—probing, contradictory, and plural'.<sup>67</sup> It is this sense of a 'plurality' of philosophical encounters which we find demonstrated in *Broom's* conflicting 'misreadings' of Wittgenstein's early and late philosophies of language: far from offering a reliable theoretical frame for our interpretation, Wallace instead presents us with a series of philosophical 'systems' which are, inevitably, self-consciously incomplete.

While we have hitherto limited our enquiry to focus on *Broom's* encounters with the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which Wallace's novel also invokes the presence of a range of further philosophies. Lenore's ostensibly late-Wittgensteinian anxieties of 'disorientation and identity-confusion and lack of control', for example, seem to draw as much on the work of Derrida as on the *Investigations*.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Lenore's ontological crisis could arguably be read as a literalised exploration of the ramifications of Derrida's famous assertion that '*There is nothing outside of the text*'.<sup>69</sup> The critical discussion surrounding *Broom*, meanwhile, has convincingly posited a series of additional philosophical sources for the novel: Hayes-Brady has asserted the relevance of 'Paul Ricoeur's theory of self-narrative' as a theoretical foundation for *Broom's* treatment of questions of identity and self/other relationships;<sup>70</sup> Thomas Tracey has stressed the significance of the tradition of 'American Pragmatist thought' exemplified by William James, John Dewey,

---

<sup>66</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 23.

<sup>67</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 23.

<sup>68</sup> In his interview with Lipsky, Wallace notably described *Broom* as a 'conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida' (Wallace, qtd. in Lipsky, p. 35). The influence of Derrida on *Broom* has been thoroughly explored by critics: see, for example, Bradley J. Fest, who describes Derrida as an 'unnamed specter' haunting *Broom's* text (Fest, "'Then Out of the Rubble": David Foster Wallace's Early Fiction', in *Long Thing*, pp. 85–105 (p. 88); and Boswell, who interrogates the complex relationship (and fundamental distinction) between Wittgenstein's 'language-games' and Derrida's notion of 'play' (Boswell, *Understanding*).

<sup>69</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158. This famous sentence—*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*: alternately translated as 'there is no outside-text'—has served, as Nicholas Royle has noted, as 'a source of crucial misunderstandings' (*Jacques Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 62). In Royle's reading, Derrida is no more concerned with denying the existence of an extra-linguistic reality than the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*: Royle asserts, for example, that Derrida 'has always been preoccupied (in the strongest senses of that word) by what precedes or exceeds language' (Royle, p. 62). In this respect, *Broom's* treatment of Derrida is thus characterised by the same 'creative misreading' found in Wallace's appropriation of Wittgenstein's work.

<sup>70</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 104.

Charles Sanders Pierce;<sup>71</sup> while Hering has traced the beginnings of Wallace's career-length 'dialogue with Lacan' back to this early work.<sup>72</sup> Beyond these self-conscious reference points, meanwhile, *Broom* presents us with a further array of philosophical and theoretical 'systems' articulated by characters within the novel itself: from Dr Jay's absurd, vaguely gross theory of 'Hygiene Anxiety' (p. 60), in which self and other are divided by 'membranes' both psychological and bodily; to Norman Bombardini's 'Project Total Yang', wherein he attempts to grow—through unimaginably excessive eating—large enough to 'fill the universe with Self' (p. 91), thus eliminating the problem of other-directed communication altogether; to the 'family theater' (p. 160) performed by the Spaniard family, in which, through the use of masks and a pre-recorded 'audience', they attempt to vocalise and 'work through' their familial failures of communication. Surveying this multiplicity of conflicting, and sometimes overlapping, philosophical frameworks, we find each in turn claiming to offer a coherent, totalising 'system', a mode of reading which will make complete sense of the unstable, confusing relationship between language and the world (the novel's transcriptions of Dr Jay's 'rap sessions' with Rick and Lenore are, for example, comically predictable in directing their problems back to the question of 'membranes' and 'hygiene anxiety').<sup>73</sup> While often transparently ridiculous, these competing philosophies are not dismissed altogether: as *Broom* progresses, these 'systems' seem—particularly in their increasingly frequent points of intersection—to gesture towards the possibility of a unifying frame which could draw together the disparate parts of *Broom*'s narrative, towards a coherent explanation which—crucially—remains persistently half-obscured. Randy Ramal has argued that *Broom* as a whole is primarily concerned with illustrating 'the problem of theorizing', exploring how the novel shows how 'system-building and explanatory theorizing are hopeless endeavors in the attempt to understand existential, psychological, moral, or aesthetic issues in people's lives'.<sup>74</sup> While I agree that *Broom* is concerned with articulating the inevitable limitations of any philosophical 'system', I would contest Ramal's suggestion that Wallace's novel stands as an argument 'against theorization'

---

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Tracey, 'The Formative Years: David Foster Wallace's Philosophical Influences and *The Broom of the System*', in *Gesturing Toward Reality*, pp. 157–175 (p. 158).

<sup>72</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 89.

<sup>73</sup> Boswell suggests that Jay's 'hygiene theory' serves as a 'parody of psychoanalytical master-theories in general' (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 54).

<sup>74</sup> Randy Ramal, 'Beyond Philosophy: David Foster Wallace on Literature, Wittgenstein, and the Dangers of Theorizing', in *Gesturing Toward Reality*, pp. 177–198 (pp. 193–194).



altogether. Rather, I would suggest that *Broom*'s assemblage of philosophies both real and fictional finally illustrate the extent to which any single system—any attempt to offer a coherent 'reading'—must always be defined by an essential incompleteness. While each of these 'systems' offers its own aspects of utility, none of them can hope to offer us a complete means of interpreting the world, or of *Broom*'s own text.

### 'Thereof one must be silent'

This aspect of inevitable incompleteness is reflected in the overarching system of *Broom*'s own narrative structure—a structure consisting, as Patrick O'Donnell has argued, of an 'assemblage of half-finished stories, intentions gone awry, and discursive trajectories'.<sup>75</sup> O'Donnell characterises *Broom* as an 'ode to incompleteness', a text organised around 'no singular system', but rather 'comprised of dozens of stories and potential stories, trajectories and partial lines of flight, and unconnected dots'.<sup>76</sup> The novel's multiplicity of 'systems' and narrative threads come to a head in the novel's penultimate chapter, which begins with Lenore—having escaped Rick's attempt to handcuff himself to her in the Great Ohio Desert—returning to the lobby of the Bombardini Building 'in a nearly unprecedented state of piss-off' (p. 444) to collect her things from her workplace at the Frequent and Vigorous switchboards. Here, almost all of *Broom*'s various plots and characters converge: Lenore is accompanied by Andrew Sealander Lang, who has recently expressed his (at least partially reciprocated) romantic feelings for her; she is met at her cubicle by her roommate Candy Mandible, her colleague Judith Prieth, and her permanently disgruntled supervisor Walinda Peahen; she is approached with 'unprecedentedly urgent business' (p. 448) by David Bloemker, manager of her great-grandmother's nursing home, and her brother-in-law Alvin Spaniard; they are followed by her psychiatrist Dr Jay, her father Stonecipher Beadsman III, chemist Neil Obstat Jr. (who is also infatuated with Lenore), and Rick Vigorous, who has also returned from the desert. Meanwhile, throughout the scene, Norman Bombardini (who has *also* become obsessed with Lenore) continues his efforts to eat his way towards an autonomously full universe by 'having at the rear wall of the whole Building with his [. . .] stomach' (p. 453). In bringing these disparate characters and subplots to this single location, Wallace stages a final, chaotic confrontation between *Broom*'s various

<sup>75</sup> Patrick O'Donnell, 'Almost a Novel: *The Broom of the System*', in *Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, pp. 1–22 (p. 6).

<sup>76</sup> O'Donnell, p. 14.

philosophical and narrative threads.

Far from offering a cohesive conclusion, or allowing a single character (or related philosophical ‘system’) to emerge as prominent, however, the novel instead collapses under the weight of these conflicting perspectives, presenting a collective breakdown of communication—one metaphorically reflected in the malfunctioning Frequent and Vigorous telephone lines, which, having been broken for the duration of *Broom*’s narrative, are here described as having ‘finally gone totally insane’, ‘ringing and beeping like crazy’ (p. 448) through the scene. Standing at the centre of this chaos is Lenore, who is bombarded with a series of entreaties from *Broom*’s extended cast of male characters: from Dr Jay’s attempts to convince her to ‘quickly and quietly leave’ (p. 449) with him, to Norman Bombardini’s demands for ‘admission to Ms. Beadsman’s space’ (p. 453), to Stonecipher Beadsman’s requests that they discuss an urgent ‘family matter’ (p. 454), to Andy Lang’s suggestion that they both ‘just git’ (p. 452). Faced with these characters’ attempts to draw her into their respective philosophical, interpersonal, or narrative ‘systems’, Lenore asserts her autonomy by giving up altogether—one of her final lines of dialogue in the novel is her shouted exclamation, ‘I quit!’ (p. 451)—abdicating her position at the Frequent and Vigorous switchboards, and, with this, removing herself from the text itself: Lenore’s voice appears less and less frequently in the chapter’s concluding pages, while she is significantly missing from the novel’s subsequent, final chapter. In Lenore’s final ‘disappearance’, Wallace forces us to confront the chaos of *Broom*’s manifold conflicting plots, characters, and ‘systems’, denying us the possibility of establishing a unifying reading of the novel’s narrative and philosophical disorder.

*Broom*’s ending, then, is one defined by anti-climax, by a stubborn refusal to reveal a conclusive meaning. It is left teasingly unclear what actually *happens* at the penultimate chapter’s close, with our knowledge primarily coming from Rick’s cryptic retrospective account of ‘alphabets of old people, or children singing like birds, or fat men chewing on buildings, or phone crews fishing in black air, or people eating each other’s membranes’ (p. 463). Olsen has described *Broom* as ‘one grand system of communication’, its various stories-within-stories serving as parts of a ‘master network’.<sup>77</sup> At the novel’s end, however, this ‘network’ is marked by a self-conscious incompleteness, crystallised in Rick’s unfinished closing sentence: ‘I’m a man of my’ (p. 467). We are faced here with the same question posed in the introduction to this

---

<sup>77</sup> Olsen, ‘Termite Art’, pp. 210–211.

thesis: how are we to read *Broom*'s closing unfinished-ness? And how might our interpretation be informed by the various conflicting modes of philosophical reading exhibited throughout the novel?

In many respects, *Broom*'s incomplete ending points us again back towards the philosophy of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*—and, particularly, towards the philosophical *method* underpinning Wittgenstein's late work. In contrast with the *Tractatus*'s attempts to offer a 'complete', totalising account of language—to 'draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts'<sup>78</sup>—the *Investigations* finds Wittgenstein rejecting the notion of a discernible 'limit' to language altogether:

But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call 'symbols', 'words', 'sentences'. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.<sup>79</sup>

In the face of this limitless multiplicity of potential language-games, the later Wittgenstein presents us with a philosophy which is, in a sense, incomplete: the *Investigations* is thus structured as a series of discrete, specific enquiries into the practical uses of language, enquiries which by definition do not claim to offer any coherent or complete philosophical 'whole'. McGinn suggests that, for the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*,

the very idea of completeness has ceased to make sense. There is no essential structure or function against which the notion of completeness can be defined; it makes no more sense to speak of a complete language than to speak of a complete tool-kit.<sup>80</sup>

In the *Investigations*, we are faced with a model of philosophical 'reading' characterised by a necessary, pragmatic incompleteness, an unfinished-ness which reflects the infinite possibilities of language-in-use.

To a certain extent, *Broom*'s 'unfinished' ending seems to invite a reading in terms of this pragmatic incompleteness. The various narrative pieces and theoretical 'systems' of Wallace's novel can thus be framed as a series of 'investigations' which, rather than adding up to a coherent whole, instead pose a series of open-ended questions about the nature of language, the possibility of human 'connection', and the communicative potential of fiction—questions which

---

<sup>78</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 'Preface'.

<sup>79</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, I, §23.

<sup>80</sup> McGinn, pp. 49–50.

we, as readers, are left to further explore beyond the limits of the printed page. We find this late-Wittgensteinian approach animating many of the existing critical readings of *Broom* (and of Wallace's fiction as a whole): Boswell, for example, argues that *Broom* establishes 'an open system of communication—an elaborate and entertaining game—between author and reader', inviting an interpretation which is 'open and never complete',<sup>81</sup> while Hayes-Brady—drawing in part on the *Investigations*, but also on Rorty's subsequent pragmatic readings of, and developments upon, Wittgenstein's late philosophy—suggests that *Broom* 'bursts out of the borders of coherent structure, gesturing at further conversation beyond the narrative borders'.<sup>82</sup> Read in this way, *Broom*'s incomplete final sentence becomes an emblem of its pragmatic 'openness', a visible marker of the space left for our readerly participation in its complex 'language-game'. Boswell concludes that the 'novel ends with a blank space. The system remains open'.<sup>83</sup>

I would argue, however, that, running parallel to this aspect of dialogic openness, *Broom*'s incomplete ending is simultaneously defined by a conflicting sense of closedness, by a suggestion of an inescapable *limit* to the narrative's apparently 'open system of communication'. We find evidence of this 'limit' again encoded within *Broom*'s closing sentence: as noted in our introduction, Rick's final statement, while teasingly incomplete, also directs us toward the specific endpoint of the inevitable word 'word'. Kelly has directly contested Boswell's dialogic reading of *Broom*'s final 'blank space', arguing that

because there is no real ambiguity concerning the next word in this closing sentence, the reader's agency is in fact negated. There is thus a gesture toward an open system and a readerly dialogue, rather than an achievement of it.<sup>84</sup>

*Broom*'s closing incompletion thus establishes a tension between the open and the closed: a tension which I would suggest is equally felt in the wider 'unfinished' narrative structure of the novel as a whole. Even as *Broom*'s various narrative and philosophical 'systems' seem—in their refusal to cohere into a unitary whole—to reflect the discrete, open-ended 'investigations' of Wittgenstein's late work, Wallace's novel does not reject the possibility of totalising completion altogether. In particular, the mysterious, marginal figure of Lenore's great-grandmother

---

<sup>81</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 31.

<sup>82</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 86. See also Dulk, who has argued for the usefulness of reading Wallace's fiction—and literary fiction in general—as 'a form of grammatical investigation' (*Existentialist Engagement*, p. 158).

<sup>83</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 63.

<sup>84</sup> Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas', in *Long Thing*, pp. 3–22 (p. 10).

‘Gramma’ Beadsman—the Wittgenstein-acolyte whose disappearance first sets *Broom*’s plot in motion—seems to offer the possibility of a unified answer to its numerous unanswered questions. Over the course of the novel, it becomes increasingly clear that Gramma Beadsman is somehow ‘behind’ almost all of *Broom*’s disparate philosophical and narrative threads: it is Gramma who apparently orchestrates many of the unlikely ‘chance meetings’ between characters; Gramma who shapes many of the novel’s ostensibly conflicting philosophical ‘systems’ (Dr Jay’s ‘Hygiene Anxiety’, for example, is eventually revealed as a fabrication invented by Lenore Sr.); Gramma who hastens the collapse of Rick and Lenore’s relationship (and pushes Lenore towards an alternative romance with Andy Lang); and finally Gramma who is revealed to have been hiding in the tunnels beneath the Bombardini Building, causing the breakdown of communication in the Frequent and Vigorous phone lines. Boswell asserts that ‘Gramma Beadsman is, in fact, the ghost of this book’s plot machinery,—that is, the broom of the system [. . .] Indeed, nearly every major plot development in the novel eventually points back to her’.<sup>85</sup> As suggested by her nickname, Lenore Sr. seems to stand as the underlying ‘grammar’ of the novel’s chaotic narrative ‘system’, operating, as Fest has argued, as a ‘limit within which the world of the text must always operate, a boundary necessary for any language game to be played’.<sup>86</sup> In this respect, ‘Gramma’ Beadsman’s marginal presence thus works to destabilise the notion of *Broom* as an ‘open’ work, offering the implied presence of a series of definite ‘answers’, and thus placing an limit on the interpretative possibilities of *Broom*’s non-ending. Crucially, however, Lenore Sr. is persistently and entirely absent from Wallace’s text: Fest notes the significance of the fact that, in a text so obsessed with the efficacy of language, ‘Lenore Sr never actually *says* anything in the novel’.<sup>87</sup> Even as it establishes her as a limiting ‘master key’ to its various systems, *Broom* denies us access to this conclusive ‘grammar’, positioning Gramma Beadsman’s totalising ‘answers’ outside the margins of its narrative, frustratingly beyond our reach.<sup>88</sup>

In her paradoxical state of absent presence, Lenore Sr. comes to stand as an embodied

---

<sup>85</sup> Boswell, p. 32.

<sup>86</sup> Fest, p. 90.

<sup>87</sup> Fest, p. 89.

<sup>88</sup> Lenore Sr. is, significantly, apparently in possession of a mysterious ‘green book’ (p. 40), the contents of which are never revealed to either Lenore or the reader. In this unseen book (potentially implied to be an unpublished work by Wittgenstein), Wallace offers the further suggestion of a coherent text which might draw together the novel’s various conflicting philosophical ‘systems’—a text which, like ‘Gramma’ herself, is left finally inaccessible.

reflection of the particular incompleteness presented by Wallace at the end of *Broom*, an incompleteness which, I propose, gestures just as much towards the terminal ‘silence’ at the conclusion of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* as it does to the pragmatic open-ness of the *Investigations*. Unlike the ‘grammatical’ enquiries of the *Investigations*, the *Tractatus* is concerned with delineating the limits of language as a complete whole: ‘*The limits of my language*’, Wittgenstein argues, ‘mean the limits of my world’.<sup>89</sup> In its attempt to offer an ‘unassailable and definitive’ account of the structures of language—of everything that can and cannot ‘be said’—however, the *Tractatus* is marked by an incompleteness of its own.<sup>90</sup> Over the course of his enquiry, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* comes to argue that the statements of philosophy—statements which include, significantly, the propositions of the *Tractatus* itself—belong to the class of that which ‘cannot be said’: of the unspeakable, and thus the ‘nonsensical’. At the conclusion of the *Tractatus*, therefore, Wittgenstein is faced with the paradoxical problem that his own work—a work which has, according to his preface, ‘finally solved’ a number of fundamental philosophical problems—is nonsensical.<sup>91</sup> This problem is famously confronted in the *Tractatus*’s penultimate proposition:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it).

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.<sup>92</sup>

Even as it offers an apparently ‘complete’ account of the relationship between language and the world, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is, when read according to its own philosophical ‘system’, finally ‘senseless’, marked by an unavoidable incompleteness. The propositions of the *Tractatus* are imagined as a ‘ladder’ which must be thrown away once it has been climbed, a means of gesturing towards something fundamentally unspeakable, something beyond the limits of language (‘There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical’).<sup>93</sup> It is this sense of that which is beyond the reach of language, of an unfinished-ness present in any attempt to offer a totalising philosophical account of the world, which is addressed in the *Tractatus*’s final, poetic proposition: ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.6.

<sup>90</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, ‘Preface’.

<sup>91</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, ‘Preface’.

<sup>92</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.54.

<sup>93</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.522.

<sup>94</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 7.

At the conclusion of ‘The Empty Plenum’, Wallace explicitly addresses this ‘terrible & moving final prescription’ of ‘the master’s *Tractatus*’, arguing that the proposition ‘is only indirectly what it’s really about. It whispers & plays. It’s really about the plenitude of emptiness, the importance of silence, in terms of speech’.<sup>95</sup> I would suggest that it is this ‘important’ silence which we find articulated in the concluding unfinished-ness of *Broom*. While Wallace gestures in part towards the open-ended ‘language-games’ of the *Investigations*, *Broom*’s ending looks back to the speechlessness evoked by Wittgenstein’s early philosophy: a philosophy which directs us towards a totalising ‘completion’, but which finally opens out onto an unspeakable blankness, a silence which, while partially prescribed by the text, retains something of the ‘mystical’. In this unresolved (and unresolvable) tension between these two competing modes of incompleteness, *Broom* offers us a means of theorising our own unstable, uncertain readerly responses to the various points of unfinished-ness which mark his body of work—of the conflict between dialogic, participatory communication and monologic, unspeakable (and unreadable) ‘silence’ which will go on to characterise his subsequent fictional oeuvre.

---

<sup>95</sup> Wallace, ‘The Empty Plenum’, pp. 115–6.

## 2. The Journey Worstward: *Girl with Curious Hair*

### ‘Post-Post-’

Since the beginnings of his literary career, criticism of Wallace has placed focus on his intertextual engagements with other writers. From the 1986 *Kirkus* review of *Broom*, which dismissed Wallace as a ‘something of puerile Pynchon, a discount Don DeLillo’,<sup>1</sup> to Thompson’s recent consideration of the author as a ‘highly pragmatic reader of global texts’,<sup>2</sup> Wallace’s work has been repeatedly considered in terms of its debts to, and encounters with, a range of literary intertexts, with Wallace himself consistently figured, as Hayes-Brady has argued, as ‘a writer deeply embedded in other writings’.<sup>3</sup> Surveying the numerous critical accounts of this ‘embeddedness’, we find Wallace’s oeuvre most frequently read in terms of its uneasy relationship with his literary predecessors—and, particularly, of its ambivalent, highly self-conscious negotiation with the legacy of postmodern metafiction. Drawing on the provocative statements of literary intent articulated in his early essays and interviews—including, most notably, his extended critique of ‘postmodern irony’ in ‘E Unibus Pluram’,<sup>4</sup> and his collective characterisation of Nabokov, Pynchon, Burroughs, Coover, and Barth as his ‘real enemy, the patriarch for my patricide’ in his interview with McCaffery<sup>5</sup>—critics have frequently addressed Wallace’s reflexively-signposted attempts to ‘get over’ the spectre of postmodernism, to find his way towards a new mode of ‘post-postmodern’ American writing.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not we feel that Wallace succeeds in these attempts, this somewhat awkward notion of the ‘post-postmodern’ nonetheless offers a useful frame for articulating the generational ambivalence which marks Wallace’s work. In an influential mid-career analysis, Scott described Wallace’s fiction as ‘haunted by a feeling of belatedness’, and we find this sense of the self-consciously

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Review of *The Broom of the System*’, *Kirkus Reviews*, 1 January 1986  
<<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/david-foster-wallace/broom-of-the-system/>> [accessed 18 June 2019].

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, *Global Wallace*, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace, ‘E Unibus Pluram’, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Wallace, ‘Interview with McCaffery’, p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Boswell’s description of Wallace as ‘a nervous member of some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnameable) third wave of modernism’ (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 1). This aspect of the ‘unnameable’ is reflected in the various, never-wholly-satisfactory critical attempts which have been made to offer a stable term for the work of Wallace and his contemporaries (a loose group most often containing Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, and Zadie Smith): from Kelly’s ‘New Sincerity’, to Konstantinou’s ‘Postirony’, to Martin Paul Eve’s ‘Metamodernism’ (Eve, ‘Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace and the Problems of “Metamodernism”: Post-Millennial Post-Postmodernism?’, *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*, 1.1 (2012), 7–25).



belated—the uneasily ‘post-post’—present within the ambivalent, reflexive invocations of his literary predecessors which punctuate Wallace’s novels and stories.<sup>7</sup>

Looking beyond these key points of reference, however, Wallace’s intertextual ‘readings’ are often more diffuse, and more complex, than this ‘post-postmodern’ tag would suggest. Alongside the ghostly ‘patriarchal’ presences of Pynchon and Barth, Wallace’s writing is marked by its invocation of a broad range of literary and pop cultural sources. There is evidence for this breadth of reading even within *Broom*: while early commentators focused almost exclusively on Wallace’s debt to Pynchon, critics have since reassessed Wallace’s debut in terms of its parallel allusions to (and/or parodies of) the work of Updike, Nabokov, Kafka, and Puig.<sup>8</sup> While these critics have offered a broader understanding of the intertextual coordinates for Wallace’s fiction, I am more concerned with again addressing the question of *how* Wallace’s work engages with these literary intertexts, and how this engagement works to shape and inform our own reading of his work. Building on the previous chapter’s exploration of Wallace’s philosophical intertextual engagements, this chapter turns to Wallace’s 1989 story collection *Girl with Curious Hair*—and, particularly, to the collection’s final long story ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way’—to investigate the nature of Wallace’s intertextual ‘readings’, readings which, I contend, are again defined by an inescapable aspect of the incomplete.

### ‘A weird kind of forger’

In many respects, the stories of *Girl* are characterised by the same early-career ‘clumsiness’ which we identified in *Broom*. Like Wallace’s first novel, *Girl* is an unmistakably formative work, one which displays the marks of an author still establishing the parameters of his fictional project. As with *Broom*, Wallace later expressed a retrospective embarrassment over these early stories: in his interview with McCaffery, for example, he acknowledged the ‘unsubtle and clumsy’ qualities of ‘Little Expressionless Animals’, while dismissing ‘Westward’ altogether:

God, even talking about it makes me want to puke. The *pretension*. Twenty-five-year-olds should be locked away and denied ink and paper. Everything I wanted to do came out in the story, but it came out just as what it was: crude

---

<sup>7</sup> Scott, para. 8.

<sup>8</sup> For *Broom*’s parodic echoes of Nabokov and Updike, see Boswell, *Understanding*, pp. 41–45. For the novel’s invocations of Puig and Kafka, see Thompson, *Global Wallace*, pp. 60–61, 134.

and naive and pretentious.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these continued elements of unsubtlety, however, *Girl*'s stories nonetheless demonstrate a development in Wallace's writing from the 'college thesis' limitations of *Broom*. In part, this progression is evident in the range of narrative voices found across the collection. Reflecting on *Broom* in a later interview, Wallace admitted that one of the novel's key 'weaknesses' was that

a lot of the characters seem to have the same voice: Rick Vigorous sort of sounds like David Bloemker who sort of sounds like Norman Bombardini and even Lenore's father. A lot of that is a parody of intellectual prose.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, *Girl* is marked by an array of distinctive narrative registers: in an early review, Alfred Alcorn notes how each of its stories has 'its own distinct style, its own set of rhetorics', describing Wallace as being 'like a mockingbird', both in his adoption of 'many voices' and his capacity to sing 'beautifully in all of them'.<sup>11</sup> We find evidence of this polyphony throughout the book: from the affectless monologue of the psychopathic 'Sick Puppy' in the title story, to the broken sentences of Mitch and Mayfly in 'Everything is Green', to the old-world Jewish colloquialisms of Labov in 'Say Never', to the voices of the numerous real-world figures (including David Letterman, Lyndon B. Johnson, and *Jeopardy!*-host Alex Trebek) which punctuate the collection.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, however, Alcorn's 'mockingbird' simile captures how these voices are united by an essential aspect of *imitation*: in his interview with Lipsky, Wallace would later reflect on his authorial gifts for mimicry, describing himself as 'a weird kind of forger. I mean, I can *sound* kind of like anybody'.<sup>13</sup> In many respects, *Girl*'s disparate narrative rhetorics can be read as a series of self-conscious 'forgeries' of other literary texts. Where *Broom* was primarily defined by its arrangement of competing philosophical 'systems', *Girl* is characterised by a comparable assemblage of literary 'readings'—readings which, in their aspects of transparent 'awkwardness' of 'unsubtlety', again provide an insight into the kind of intertextual engagement employed by Wallace across his writing career.

Within the scholarly reception of *Girl*, critics have tracked the various sources for Wallace's forgeries: from 'Girl with Curious Hair''s parodic echoing of the nihilistic

---

<sup>9</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with McCaffery', pp. 40–1.

<sup>10</sup> Wallace 'Interview with Kennedy and Polk', p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Alcorn, 'Review of *Girl with Curious Hair*', *Harvard Book Review*, 15/16, 1990, 14–15 (pp. 14–15).

<sup>12</sup> Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair*. Further references to *Girl* in this chapter will be placed in parentheses in the text.

<sup>13</sup> Wallace, qtd. in Lipsky, p. 258.

minimalism of 'Brat Pack' writers such as Bret Easton Ellis and Jill Eisenstadt;<sup>14</sup> to 'Lyndon's' homage to the historiographic metafiction of Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977);<sup>15</sup> to 'Everything is Green's' reproduction of the 'Dirty Realism' of Raymond Carver and Jayne Anne Phillips;<sup>16</sup> to 'John Billy's' exaggerated mimicry of William H. Gass's *Omensetter's Luck* (1966);<sup>17</sup> to 'Say Never's' emulation of Jewish American authors such as Philip Roth and Alan Lelchuk.<sup>18</sup> In the reflexive attention which it draws to these literary intertexts, *Girl* as a whole offers a self-conscious 'map' of Wallace's reading at this early point in his career: Boddy characterises the collection as 'a kind of *Künstlerroman*, a portrait of the artist's growth through his virtuosic engagement with other books'.<sup>19</sup> The nature of Wallace's intertextual encounters is, however, not explicable in straightforward terms: while many seem positioned as critiques (Boddy suggests that Wallace's parodies demonstrate the limitations of his targets' work, acting as 'a provocation to new forms'), at other points they come closer to appreciative homages, attempts to echo the successful strategies of these other writers.<sup>20</sup> This uncertainty is present within individual stories: even 'Girl with Curious Hair', which seems, as Boswell has argued, like a parodic effort to explode the vacuity of Ellis's 'phony nihilism', can equally be read as an attempt to borrow and reframe the more effective qualities of his writing—Max suggests that Wallace, as 'a natural mimic, [. . .] admired the strong voice Ellis has found; he saw its potential'.<sup>21</sup> *Girl's* intertextual 'readings' thus present an unresolved tension, an oscillation between admiration and criticism. Through these self-conscious uneasy 'forgeries', Wallace can be seen to 'try on' a series of diverse literary styles, attempting to define his own characteristic authorial voice. In this, we find *Girl's* stories betraying their compositional origins: much of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Max suggests that 'Girl' is 'written in the same key' as Ellis' 1985 novel *Less Than Zero* (*Every Love Story*, p. 73). See also Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 78, and Kasia Boddy, 'A Fiction of Response: *Girl with Curious Hair* in Context' in *Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, pp. 23–41 (p. 34).

<sup>15</sup> Max notes that Wallace read Coover's novel 'shortly before' composing his own 'fictionalized biography' (*Every Love Story*, p. 84).

<sup>16</sup> Boddy characterises the story as Wallace's attempt at a Carverian 'low-rent' tragedy ('Fiction of Response', p. 33).

<sup>17</sup> Max notes that the story began as an attempt to echo the 'laconic hillbilly voice' of Gass's novel (*Every Love Story*, p. 74).

<sup>18</sup> Boswell argues that the story is an 'homage to and parody' of Roth's 'lighter work' (*Understanding*, p. 97), while Boddy alternatively suggests that its parodic 'target' may have been Lelchuk, a 'minor' novelist and 'unsympathetic teacher' of Wallace's from Amherst ('Fiction of Response', p. 41, n. 12).

<sup>19</sup> Boddy, 'Fiction of Response', p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 73. Max goes on to note that Wallace 'would never acknowledge' his debt to Ellis, describing how, when Wallace's editor Gerry Howard 'asked after reading the story whether Wallace had read *Less Than Zero*, Wallace told him no' (Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 73).

collection was written while Wallace was studying for a creative writing MFA at the University of Arizona, and we can see how its ‘forgeries’ accordingly read as attempts to ‘workshop’ or ‘work through’ Wallace’s ambivalent relationship with his literary predecessors and contemporaries.<sup>22</sup> This sense of *Girl*’s stories as ‘workshop pieces’ also, however, draws our attention to the limitations of these intertextual encounters. In his review, Alcorn concludes that the ‘verbal richness’ of the collection ‘doesn’t make up for what might be called a lack of heart’, noting that, despite its collection of ‘remarkable voices’, most of *Girl*’s characters come across as ‘puppets on which to hang these voices’.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, Wallace’s stories arguably struggle to surpass their status as writerly ‘exercises’, anxious ‘ventriloquisms’ marked by an unavoidable aspect of hollowness, of incompleteness.

Of course, even as it reflexively invokes and critiques this array of literary intertexts, *Girl* as a whole cannot be wholly dismissed as a series of mere ‘forgeries’: Hering asserts that, while it is certainly possible to read the collection as ‘Wallace’s parroting of several preceding and contemporary writers’, this approach is ‘a little reductive’.<sup>24</sup> Running beneath *Girl*’s ventriloquisms is a consistent suggestion of a larger animating project, an attempt on Wallace’s part to ‘move fiction forwards’. Max suggests that Wallace’s post-*Broom* writing is driven by a desire to ‘answer the question of how to write in a new way’, to outline a ‘new direction’ for both his own work and for contemporary US fiction more widely.<sup>25</sup> In attempting to trace the outline of this ‘project’, we find our reading again shaped by the metacommentary offered by Wallace’s essays and interviews: specifically, *Girl*’s intertextual engagements are illuminated and recontextualised by Wallace’s first published non-fiction essay, ‘Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young’.<sup>26</sup> ‘Fictional Futures’—first published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1988, a year after *Girl*—presents the first example of Wallace using his non-fiction writing to shape the critical reception of his fiction: Boddy goes so far as to suggest that the

---

<sup>22</sup> See Max, *Every Love Story*, ch. 3. Wallace’s uneasy position as a product of what Mark McGurl has termed the ‘Program Era’ (*The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011)) has been addressed by various critics, including Boddy, who describes *Girl* as ‘both an exemplary product’ of a literary era shaped by the rise of creative writing programs and ‘an interrogation of that era’s modes and mores’ (‘Fiction of Response’, p. 23); and McGurl himself, who characterises Wallace as a ‘singularly “high performance” product of the Program Era [. . .] with all of the fragility and tendency to break down that that term implies’ (McGurl, ‘The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program’, *Boundary 2*, 41.3 (2014), 27–54 (p. 33)).

<sup>23</sup> Alcorn, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> Wallace, ‘Fictional Futures’.

collection can be read ‘like a companion volume to the essay, articulating its central anxieties and offering preliminary solutions to the problems it raises’.<sup>27</sup> While I would contest the suggestion that *Girl* offers any kind of concrete ‘solution’ to the problems identified in ‘Fictional Futures’, Wallace’s essay offers a persuasive frame for interpreting the collection’s aesthetic strategies. The essay finds Wallace surveying and critiquing the field of late-80s US literary fiction, identifying ‘a certain numbing *sameness* about much contemporary young writing’.<sup>28</sup> Wallace suggests that the ‘vast bulk’ of this writing is dividable into ‘three dreary camps’: ‘(1) Neiman Marcus Nihilism, declaimed via six-figure Uppies and their salon-tanned, morally vacant offspring’; ‘(2) Catatonic Realism, a.k.a. Ultraminimalism, a.k.a. Bad Carver, in which suburbs are wastelands, adults automata, and narrators blank perceptual engines’; and ‘(3) Workshop Hermeticism’, writing-program-friendly ‘well-made’ stories, reliably featuring ‘no character without Freudian trauma in accessible past [. . .] no image undissolved into regulation Updikean metaphor; no overture without a dramatized scene to “show” what’s “told”’.<sup>29</sup> In its scathing assessment of these trends, Wallace’s essay provides vital context for *Girl*’s ventriloquisms: it is possible to read a number of *Girl*’s stories (most notably ‘Girl with Curious Hair’, ‘Everything is Green’, and ‘Say Never’) as mapping directly on to these ‘dreary camps’, standing as Wallace’s attempts to appropriate and/or parodically critique the work of his peers.

Beyond this, however, ‘Fictional Futures’ also provides an insight into the larger project informing these intertextual ‘forgeries’. Wallace’s essay is further concerned with interrogating his own uneasy position within this group of ‘Conspicuously Young’ writers, a ‘generation that is both New and, in some odd way, One’.<sup>30</sup> For Wallace, he and his contemporaries are ‘conjoined less by chronology’ than by the ‘new and singular environment’ of late-80s US culture: an environment characterised by the growing omnipresence of television (‘the American generation born after, say, 1955 is the first for whom television is something to be *lived with*, not just looked at. [. . .] TV’s as much a part of reality as Toyotas and gridlock. We quite literally cannot “imagine” life without it’), and the commercial logic of late-capitalist advertising (‘a young culture so willingly bombarded with messages equating what one

---

<sup>27</sup> Boddy, ‘Fiction of Response’, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> Wallace, ‘Fictional Futures’, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> Wallace, ‘Fictional Futures’, p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Wallace, ‘Fictional Futures’, p. 41.

consumes with who one is that brand loyalty is now an acceptable synecdoche of identity, of character').<sup>31</sup> Wallace argues that these cultural shifts have radically altered the nature and process of 'literary production', inevitably informing (and distorting) the 'aesthetic values and literary choices' of his 'Conspicuously Young' generation.<sup>32</sup> In a contemporary review of *Girl*, Sven Birkerts interpreted Wallace's collection as a response to a 'crisis in the arts', a collective feeling that 'the greater part of contemporary experience has fallen out of the reach of language—or very nearly so':

So much of our time is passed in talking on phones, driving on freeways, staring at terminals or TV screens, and waiting in lobbies. Larger and larger portions of what our lives are made up of cannot be encompassed in coherent narrative form. The writer must either distort or else work around the expanding blank spots.<sup>33</sup>

In 'Fictional Futures', Wallace expresses his anxiety over the unstable place of literary fiction within this unprecedentedly technologically (and televisually) mediated world, and, with this, tentatively points towards the possibility of a 'next step' for contemporary US writing, a mode of fiction with the power to productively respond to this 'crisis'.

Returning to *Girl*, we can see how Wallace's collection can thus productively be framed as an attempt to determine the nature of this 'step forward'. This animating project is felt in the collection's explicit concern with the televisual. Two of *Girl*'s stories ('Little Expressionless Animals' and 'My Appearance') are set in the world of TV-production—a world in which characters' efforts at interpersonal communication and connection are everywhere mediated by the presence of a series of screens, mirrors, and lenses. In 'Little Expressionless Animals', the story's action is frequently related as 'reflected in the dark window' (p. 5), while *Jeopardy!* champion Julie Smith is described as being 'like some lens, a filter for that great unorganized force that some in the industry have spent their whole lives trying to locate and focus (p. 24).<sup>34</sup> In 'My Appearance', meanwhile, these distorting reflections and refractions proliferate, with the protagonist Edilyn's appearance on *Late Night with David Letterman* described as viewed

<sup>31</sup> Wallace, 'Fictional Futures', p. 42–3.

<sup>32</sup> Wallace, 'Fictional Futures', p. 42.

<sup>33</sup> Sven Birkerts, 'David Foster Wallace', in *American Energies: Essays on Fiction* (New York: William Morrow, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> In its evocation of these distorting, 'concave' and 'convex' reflective surfaces, 'Little Expressionless Animals' offers a further key instance of intertextual appropriation: John Ashbery's 1975 poem *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1975), a source notably acknowledged on *Girl*'s copyright page. For more on Wallace's engagement with Ashbery, see Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 73–4.

through a ‘wall of monitors’, affording ‘several views of me at once’ (p. 189). In these reflected, distorted environments, Wallace presents a concretised depiction of a contemporary culture in which—as he argues in ‘Fictional Futures’—‘the most significant feature of persons is *watchableness*, and that contemporary human worth is not just isomorphic with but rooted in the phenomenon of watching’.<sup>35</sup> We find this televisual logic encoded even within the structures of *Girl*’s stories: in his interview with McCaffery, Wallace reflects on the ‘scrambled flash-cut form’ he employed in ‘Little Expressionless Animals’, a form which consciously mimics the rhythms and techniques of commercial TV (or, perhaps, the experience of channel-surfing).<sup>36</sup> While these pop-culture references were to some extent present in *Broom* (which notably features a *Gilligan’s Island*-themed bar, and an extended discussion of a drinking game based around the *Bob Newhart Show*), they are here repositioned at the centre of Wallace’s work: Max suggests that *Girl* demonstrates ‘Wallace’s first attempt to treat seriously’ issues that had in *Broom* ‘been played for laughs’.<sup>37</sup> This underlying project recontextualises the literary ventriloquisms found across the collection: through this series of intertextual ‘exercises’, we find Wallace attempting to determine the direction of his imagined literary ‘next step’, to find, within these various literary trends and techniques, a mode of writing capable of evoking and confronting the particular texture of late-80s American experience.

Throughout *Girl*, however, it is difficult to escape the feeling that these attempts are themselves incomplete. It is not insignificant that the ‘manifesto’ offered by ‘Fictional Futures’ does not, finally, conclude with a vision of what this literary ‘next step’ will actually look like: Wallace comes to the conclusion that his ‘Conspicuously Young’ generation is ‘united by confusion, if nothing else’, offering only a broad-strokes vision of a ‘Whole New Generation’ who will ‘make art, maybe make great art, maybe even make great art change’.<sup>38</sup> Confronted with *Girl*’s array of shifting, ambivalent ‘forgeries’, we are left with a cumulative impression of a writer entangled within these anxious intertextual ‘readings’, unable to discern a clear ‘way forwards’. This incompleteness is self-consciously addressed in ‘Here and There’, a story which

---

<sup>35</sup> Wallace, ‘Fictional Futures’, p. 48. *Girl*’s complex arrangements of reflection and refraction have been explored in greater detail by Hering (*Fiction and Form*, ch. 3).

<sup>36</sup> Wallace, ‘Interview with McCaffery’, p. 39.

<sup>37</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 75.

<sup>38</sup> Wallace, ‘Fictional Futures’, pp. 66, 68. This conclusion comes five years before Wallace’s famous—if arguably equally vague—call for a fiction of ‘single-entendre principles’ at the close of ‘E Unibus Pluram’ (p. 81), an essay which takes up and builds on many of the key ideas from ‘Fictional Futures’.

Wallace, in a letter to Steven Moore, claimed was *Girl*'s 'only really autobiographical piece'.<sup>39</sup> In the story, Bruce, a 'hulking, pigeon-toed, blond, pale, red-lipped Midwestern boy' (p. 153), who has been read by various critics as a clear 'Wallace stand-in', outlines his desire to become 'the first really great poet of technology' (p. 155).<sup>40</sup> Though not a fiction-writer, Bruce—the author of 'an epic poem about variable systems of information- and energy-transfer' (p. 154)—reflexively echoes Wallace in his stated belief that he is 'standing on the cusp between two eras' (p. 162), his desire to find a literary mode capable of responding to a contemporary culture defined by screens, technology, and data. Significantly, however, Bruce's response to this 'crisis' is a far cry from the stories of *Girl*: he argues that the features of 'traditional' literary language—the 'poetic units that allude and evoke and summon' (p. 167), with their focus on the human, the bodily, or the metaphorical—have been rendered obsolete. In their place, he positions himself as 'an aesthete of the cold, the new, the right, the truly and spotlessly *here*' (p. 155), envisioning a future poetry consisting entirely of 'axiom, sign, and function' (p. 167), a literature which leaves behind the inefficiencies and imperfections of language altogether. In many respects, Bruce stands as an inverse mirror-image of the Wallace of *Girl*: if Wallace's collection is inextricably caught up with the literature of the past, Bruce's poetry is willing to abandon the structures and conventions of the 'literary' altogether in service to a wholly new, technologically-informed kind of writing. Crucially, however, Bruce's vision of a 'crystalline renaissance; cool and chip-flat' (p. 155) ultimately embodies only another kind of incompleteness. Within 'Here and There', Bruce's former girlfriend comments on the nagging sense of something *missing* from Bruce's poetry:

I said I wasn't going to pretend like I understood and disagreed but it seemed like what he thought about poetry was going to make poetry seem cold and sad. I said a big part of the realness that poems were about for me, when I read them, was feelings. I wasn't going to pretend to be sure, but I didn't think numbers and systems and functions could make people feel any way at all.  
(p. 167)<sup>41</sup>

In its attempts at evoking the technological 'perfection' of the contemporary, Bruce's writing becomes almost inhuman, failing to invoke anything approaching 'real feeling' in its readers.

<sup>39</sup> Wallace, 'Letter to Steven Moore', qtd. in Boddy, 'Fiction of Response', p. 31.

<sup>40</sup> See Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 62; Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 89.

<sup>41</sup> Significantly, Bruce's literary failures are throughout the story bound up with his wider failures of interpersonal communication, and ultimately the breakdown of his romantic relationship (Max argues that 'Here and There' can be read as an 'exaggerated variant on the typical college breakup story' (Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 62)). In this drawing together of literary and romantic 'failures of communication', Bruce thus offers an echo of Rick's abortive attempts at 'communicative' storytelling in *Broom*.



Through its reflexive, distorted, mirroring of Wallace's own fictional project, 'Here and There' leads us to recognise the incompleteness of *Girl*'s efforts to 'move fiction forwards', while also, simultaneously, inviting us to consider the possibility that *any* attempt at literary 'progression', any attempt to decisively outline a 'next step' for contemporary writing, will always carry its own aspects of the incomplete.

### Westward Ho

*Girl*'s gestures towards literary 'progress' are brought to a head in the collection's final long story, 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way'. Boswell describes 'Westward' as 'repris[ing] all the numerous themes and innovations that preceded it', and we can see how the story stands as both a culmination of and an expansion upon the various strands of enquiry raised across *Girl*.<sup>42</sup> 'Westward' finds Wallace again focused on depicting and interrogating the specific textures of late-1980s American experience: from the inescapable presence of television (the story's central characters engage in an extended debate over the merit and meanings of 80s police drama *Hawaii Five-O*), to the pervasive influence of advertising (the plot follows a journey towards a 'Reunion of Everyone Who's Ever Appeared in a McDonald's Commercial' (p. 272), masterminded by advertising mogul J.D. Steelritter), to the uneasy position of literary fiction within this contemporary culture (the story's creative-writing-student protagonists—attendants of the fictional 'East Chesapeake Tradeschool Writing Program'—invite consideration of the degree to which the business of fiction-writing has been subsumed into this commercialised late-80s environment).<sup>43</sup> Recapitulating these various ideas, Wallace situates 'Westward' as both a summation of *Girl*'s concerns and a self-conscious attempt to draw them into some kind of coherent whole.

With this, 'Westward' also stands as *Girl*'s strongest and most explicit claim to outline a 'new direction' for US fiction. Like Bruce in 'Here and There', 'Westward's' protagonist—writing-student and competitive archer Mark Nechtr—offers a knowingly distorted reflection of

---

<sup>42</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 70.

<sup>43</sup> In juxtaposing its creative-writing-student protagonists with the unbounded commercialism of Steelritter's McDonald's 'Reunion', 'Westward' arguably offers a concrete vision of Wallace's anxiety, expressed in 'Fictional Futures', that 'Writing Programs and their grinding, story-every-three-weeks workshop assembly lines could, eventually, lower all standards, precipitate a broadlevel literary mediocrity', that could finally 'end up with a McStory chain that would put Ray Kroc to shame' (Wallace, 'Fictional Futures', p. 61).

Wallace himself. Throughout the story, Mark, like the Wallace of *Girl*, aspires to find a mode of fiction which will allow him to reflect and address the perplexities of his contemporary moment—to ‘sing to the *next* generation of the very same sad kids’ (p. 348). As in *Girl*’s preceding ‘ventriloquisms’, Mark’s (and Wallace’s) proposed ‘next step’ is built on a complex intertextual encounter with a preceding literary text: in this case, John Barth’s foundational work of postmodern metafiction ‘Lost in the Funhouse’ (1968).<sup>44</sup> On *Girl*’s copyright page, Wallace acknowledges that parts of ‘Westward’ are ‘written in the margins’ (p. vii) of Barth’s short story, and throughout his text Wallace establishes a deeply ambivalent relationship between Barth’s work and his own: from his repeated echoes and rewritings of ‘Lost in the Funhouse’’s famous opening line (‘For whom is the funhouse fun?’), to the fact that Barth himself appears as a character in the story (as the barely-disguised ‘Professor Ambrose’). In Mark, we find *Girl*’s clearest reflexive vision of an attempt to overcome the literature of the past—in this case the metafictional strategies of Barth and other postmodern writers—and outline a ‘way forward’ for contemporary American writing. Criticism of ‘Westward’ has repeatedly returned to this animating notion of literary ‘progress’, of directionality: Charles Harris has argued that the story attempts ‘to *move beyond* Barth’s postmodern synthesis to fiction’s next developmental stage’;<sup>45</sup> Boswell has suggested that it ‘seeks to chart, if not arrive at, a *new direction* for narrative art’;<sup>46</sup> while Boddy has noted that it ‘has come to be seen [. . .] as a “manifesto” for fin-de-siècle fiction’s “*next step*”’.<sup>47</sup>

Even as it establishes this notion of ‘progress’, however, ‘Westward’ is marked by the same aspects of incompleteness which we have traced across *Girl*’s stories. Wallace himself would later be unsparing in his critique of the story: in his interview with McCaffery, he reflected that

It was a horror show. The stuff’s a permanent migraine. [. . .] And maybe ‘Westward’’s only real value’ll be showing the kind of pretentious loops you fall into now if you fuck around with recursion.<sup>48</sup>

While, as we have seen above, this retrospective disparagement is to some degree typical of

---

<sup>44</sup> John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), p. 72.

<sup>45</sup> Charles B. Harris, ‘The Anxiety of Influence: The John Barth/David Foster Wallace Connection’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 55.2 (2014), 103–26 (p. 120), emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 102, emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> Boddy, ‘Fiction of Response’, p. 23, emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup> Wallace, ‘Interview with McCaffery’, p. 41.

Wallace's later attitudes to his pre-*Infinite Jest* fiction, his negative opinion of 'Westward' has been notably echoed within other critical responses to the text. In her *New York Times* review of *Girl*, Jennifer Levin dismissed 'Westward' as a 'ponderous novella', one which comes off as the sort of inside joke that 'might play best in a creative writing seminar'.<sup>49</sup> Later readings have likewise focused primarily on how the story points us towards the greater accomplishments of Wallace's later work: Boswell, for example, describes 'Westward' as both an 'engaging piece of pretentious juvenilia' and 'an astonishingly confident preface to a masterpiece [Wallace] had not even written yet',<sup>50</sup> while Fest argues that the story finds Wallace 'preparing a narratological ground for the emergence of *Infinite Jest*'.<sup>51</sup>

While there is some truth to these assessments, I would argue that, beyond its status as flawed 'dry run' for Wallace's following novel, 'Westward' is uniquely intriguing in the sheer extent of its failed 'progression', its evocation and embodiment of a fundamentally incomplete, stalled teleological movement. Hayes-Brady has asserted that 'the primary recurring image in 'Westward' is of movement, a specifically directed movement with a view to an end point'.<sup>52</sup> This movement is figured most consistently in the story's central, recurring image of the 'westward journey'. The figure of 'westwardness' has already emerged at various points across *Girl*'s preceding stories: in the fictional eulogy at conclusion of 'Lyndon', for example, Texas State Senator Jack Childs implores his listeners to 'go west. I say the further you go west, the nearer you get to Lyndon Baines Johnson' (p. 109); while in 'Here and There' the 'therapist' meaningfully notes Bruce's problem with 'remembering things west', his tendency to 'shut off' (p. 158) the voice of the ex-girlfriend who occupies this westward territory. In 'Westward', this motif is brought to the foreground: from the central journey west towards the suggestively named Illinois town of 'Collision' undertaken by the protagonists; to the discussions of contrasting landscapes East and West of the airport at which these characters find themselves stalled (and in which there are, significantly, 'no windows facing west' (p. 256)); to, most obviously, the title of the text itself. Philip Coleman has argued that the title signals 'a nexus of intertextual routes over a range of contextual domains', and we can see how Wallace cultivates

---

<sup>49</sup> Jenifer Levin, "'Love Is a Federal Highway': Review of *Girl with Curious Hair*", *New York Times*, 5 November 1989, section Books <<http://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/05/books/love-is-a-federal-highway.html>> [accessed 13 July 2019].

<sup>50</sup> Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 102.

<sup>51</sup> Fest, p. 87.

<sup>52</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 57.

a cluster of intertextual associations—allusions at once diverse and interrelated—around the notion of the ‘westward journey’, resisting any attempt to ascribe a univocal interpretation or reading.<sup>53</sup> In presenting us with this swirling ‘nexus’ of associations, ‘Westward’ establishes a series of interpretative frames for making sense of its own incomplete attempt at ‘literary progress’. I would suggest that, by teasing out the various meanings and allusions encoded within this central image of ‘westwardness’, we are thus offered a unique insight into the kind of reading, the particular mode(s) of intertextual engagement, carried out by Wallace within the story—and across *Girl* as a whole.

The most obvious intertextual ‘reading’ invoked by Wallace’s conception of westward movement is that explicitly signalled by the story’s title, which refers to the final stanza of George Berkeley’s 1728 poem ‘Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America’ (and, perhaps even more famously, to an 1861 mural by Emmanuel Gottlieb Leutze, currently displayed in the US Capitol Building in Washington DC).<sup>54</sup> In its dual allusions to Berkeley and Leutze, the story’s title immediately situates Wallace’s exploration of westward movement in relation to what Coleman has referred to as ‘a context of ideas about the meaning of “America” and “Americanness”’.<sup>55</sup> In Berkeley’s poem, America is figured as a mythologised site of cultural progress, ‘the seat of innocence / Where nature guides and virtue rules’—the journey west is imagined as a progression towards this Edenic America, a fertile ground for the ‘rise of empire and of arts’.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, Leutze’s 1861 mural—depicting the journey westward undertaken by American pioneers across the continent—acts as an affirmation of an American-ness founded on this westward expansion, a journey which, in its symbolic progression from darkness into light, frames the ‘course of empire’ as the realisation of a ‘manifest destiny’ for the American people.

The enduring significance of this American figure of the ‘westward journey’ is illustrated in Frederick Jackson Turner’s influential 1893 essay ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’, which offers a model of US history in which the country’s

---

<sup>53</sup> Philip Coleman, ‘Consider Berkely & Co.: Reading “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way”’, in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, pp. 62–74 (p. 63).

<sup>54</sup> George Berkeley, ‘Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America’, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne, Volume 7*, ed. by A. A. Luce (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1955), p. 373.

<sup>55</sup> Coleman, p. 66.

<sup>56</sup> Berkeley, p. 373. Coleman has further explored the extent to which Wallace’s reading of Berkeley’s philosophy informs his ‘considerations of American selfhood’ (Coleman, p. 65).

origins as an expanding western frontier have been instrumental in shaping a collective understanding of ‘American development’.<sup>57</sup> While Turner’s thesis is written at the close of this period of expansion, he suggests that US identity continues, and will continue, to be shaped by the notion of an ‘empire’ which progresses westward:

He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise.<sup>58</sup>

For Turner, American identity is founded on the ‘fact’ of a westward progression which, if no longer applicable in geographical terms, is still essential in informing a collective conception of American-ness. In the years since its publication, Turner’s thesis has been hugely influential, both in illustrating how idealised narratives of ‘American progress’—such as those offered by Berkeley and Leutze—have informed discussions around US identity, and in itself continuing to shape these discussions through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>59</sup>

With this intertextual frame in mind, the car ride at the centre of ‘Westward’ can thus be read as a parodic re-enactment of the ‘pioneer’s journey’ depicted in Leutze’s mural, with Mark Nechtr, D.L. Eberhardt, and Tom Sternberg cast as contemporary pilgrims, making their way from an Eastern landscape (described as ‘hard to even look [at]: flat right to the earth’s curve’ (p. 244)) towards a western ‘Reunion’ figured in the ‘ecstatic’, ‘halcyon’ (p. 310) terms of biblical revelation. By staging a version of this uniquely American ‘progress’, Wallace invites consideration of the contemporary implications of a national identity still bound up with notions of westward expansion.<sup>60</sup> While, as Paul Giles has suggested, the journey in ‘Westward’ could be read as ‘exemplifying a familiar strain of American pastoral’, in which ‘the movement westward epitomizes a paradigmatic shift from corruption into authenticity’, I would suggest

---

<sup>57</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’, in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920).

<sup>58</sup> Turner, pp. 37–8.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Rod Carveth and J. Metz’s discussions of the status of the internet as a new ‘electronic frontier’ (Frederick Jackson Turner and the Democratization of the Electronic Frontier’, *The American Sociologist* 27, 1 (1996)).

<sup>60</sup> A further ‘frame’ for the geographical westward movement has been offered by Hering, who reads of ‘Westward’ (and *Girl* as a whole) in the context of Wallace’s ambivalent treatment of the ‘problematized cultural territory’ of the American Midwest (*Fiction and Form*, p. 55). See also Paul Quinn, who draws a connection between, on the one hand, Wallace’s invocation of ‘an earlier American age of appropriation, to the unscrolling frontier and Manifest Destiny’, and on the other the ‘complex and paradox-provoking physical nature of the flat and map-like Midwestern terrain [. . .] its ambiguous cultural location—actual center but [. . .] perceived periphery’ (Quinn, “‘Location’s Location’: Placing David Foster Wallace”, in *Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, pp. 87–106 (pp. 90, 95)).

that Wallace's text is more concerned with subverting this American model of 'cultural idealism'.<sup>61</sup> Wallace's suspicion towards American 'westwardness' is implied in part within the title's allusion to Berkeley: in establishing westward progress as the 'course of empire', Wallace draws attention to the problematic implications of American expansion. From a contemporary perspective, Turner's conception of 'winning a wilderness' carries inescapable connotations of colonialist violence. By framing the narrative's central westward journey as a tracing of the path of 'Empire', Wallace destabilises any suggestion of an unproblematic movement towards 'authenticity', tacitly reminding the reader of the fact that this American 'progress' is also the progress of a violent imperialism.

The troubling implications of this 'progress' are only reinforced when we turn to another reading of 'westwardness': that of the journey west as a figure for the apocalyptic progression of late-20<sup>th</sup> century postmodernism. Amid the critical response to 'Westward', this model has perhaps been the most pervasive: Fest, for example, argues that the story's title 'forces us to pause in terms of the directionality of the novella's structure and its historical relationship to postmodern literature'.<sup>62</sup> Certainly, Wallace's ambivalence towards postmodern metafiction is founded on an awareness of its eschatological movement: in his interview with McCaffery, Wallace argues that 'metafiction's real end has always been Armageddon'.<sup>63</sup> This assertion is traceable back to Barth's 1967 essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion', where he characterised postmodern fiction as expressing the 'used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities', arguing that it 'reflects and deals with ultimacy, both technically and thematically'.<sup>64</sup> For Wallace, the recursive self-consciousness in works such as 'Lost in the Funhouse' only moves further towards this exhaustion, and, indeed, towards a self-destructive exhaustion of literary possibilities: he concludes that 'art's reflection on itself is terminal'.<sup>65</sup> In 'Westward', the protagonists' journey can thus be read as following this movement towards metafictional exhaustion, to an apocalypse manifested in their westward destination of 'Collision'. Wallace retrospectively described 'Westward' as an attempt 'to get

---

<sup>61</sup> Paul Giles, 'Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 53.3 (2007), 327–44, (p. 331–2).

<sup>62</sup> Fest, p. 98.

<sup>63</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with McCaffery', p. 30.

<sup>64</sup> Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', in *The Friday Book* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 62–76 (pp. 64, 67).

<sup>65</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with McCaffery', p. 30.

the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction's always been about [. . .] to get it over with': in its description of the protracted car ride towards Collision, Wallace reflects on his own movement towards this imagined Armageddon, his ostensible desire to exhaust the 'literature of exhaustion' altogether.<sup>66</sup>

Beyond this, we find this apocalyptic trajectory equally present in 'Westward's' broader depiction of American late capitalist postmodernity. Connie Luther has argued that 'Westward' 'identifies a postmodernism that is more far-reaching than a mere literary movement [. . .] portraying rather an all-pervasive cultural phenomenon'<sup>67</sup>—a portrayal which she traces back to Fredric Jameson's famous characterisation of postmodernism as a 'cultural dominant', an expression of the underlying 'logic' of late capitalism.<sup>68</sup> Following Luther, we can thus read the central journey in 'Westward' as charting an eschatological movement towards an apocalyptic endpoint, not merely for the self-referential strategies of Barth's metafiction, but also for Jameson's conception of cultural postmodernity. The 'Reunion' which serves as the final destination for the characters in 'Westward' is repeatedly figured in terms of a culmination of American late capitalist consumerism:

The Reunion will be huge. Larger than life. Beyond belief. Forty-four thousand actors, endorsers, celebrities, former actors, returning. 44,000 who will—photorecorded—reunite, greet, meet and eat. *Eat*. An irruption of ninety-nine-and-forty-four-one-hundredths percent pure consumption. (p. 309)

This orgy of collective consumption is described in persistently eschatological terms: it is the 'Reunion to end all reunions' (p. 267), a grotesque literalisation of the 'Armageddon-explosion' which Wallace imagines as the end-point for postmodernism. Here, we find the self-reflexive aesthetic strategies of Barth's literary 'exhaustion' uneasily subsumed into the wider movement of this apocalyptic postmodern 'journey west'—a subsumption parodically concretised in Steelritter's scheme to open a chain of 'Funhouse' nightclubs modelled on the 'funhouse' of Barth/Ambrose's short story.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with McCaffery', p. 41. For more on the apocalyptic dimensions of 'Westward' and *Broom*, see Fest.

<sup>67</sup> Connie Luther, 'David Foster Wallace: Westward with Fredric Jameson', in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, pp. 49–61 (p. 50).

<sup>68</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> Boswell notes that 'here Wallace makes his most overt argument that Barth's postmodernist techniques have not only been appropriated by popular culture but in fact have been turned into a 'franchise' of sorts (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 108). This anxiety over American fiction writing's steady surrender to this late capitalist commercial logic is further evident in 'Westward's' interrogation/critique of creative-writing programs.

In this suggestion of a shared apocalyptic *telos* for postmodern literature/culture, ‘Westward’ again gestures back to the final quatrain of the Berkley poem from which its title is taken:

Westward the course of Empire takes its way.  
The four first acts already past,  
A fifth shall close the drama with the day:  
Time’s noblest offspring is the last.<sup>70</sup>

Berkeley’s westward progress is imagined as a movement towards finality, a concluding act which will ‘close the drama with the day’. Through its interrogation of postmodernity, ‘Westward’ traces a line of connection between Berkeley’s ‘Empire’ and the hegemonic ‘empire’ of late capitalism. For Wallace, the self-referential strategies employed by writers such as Barth, and the broader instances of cultural postmodernism noted by theorists such as Jameson, are cumulatively seen to participate in the inexorable ‘progress’ of a contemporary US culture in which the logic and values of the market have become inescapable. It is significant that the apocalyptic destination which Wallace imagines for postmodern culture is the same as that of the story’s ‘pioneers’. By allowing these readings of westwardness to run parallel, Wallace invites us to consider the extent to which American national identity has been co-opted by the commercial logic of late capitalism (as exemplified in Steelritter’s Reunion)—and, indeed, the possibility that the American-ness described by Turner has been complicit in allowing this market-driven culture to develop. Turner himself notes that the American culture he articulates—a ‘democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism’—holds within it the possibility of ‘pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds’, acknowledging that this ‘has its dangers as well as its benefits’.<sup>71</sup> In ‘Westward’, we are confronted with the suggestion that the ‘progress’ of late-20<sup>th</sup> century postmodernity has been facilitated by the same individualism which Turner posits as central to US national identity, that these interrelated ‘journeys west’ are all iterations of the same eschatological movement.

Looking beyond these overlapping ‘readings’, Wallace’s central image of westwardness also invokes a further broader historical model of literary ‘progress’. Returning once more to ‘Verses on the Prospect’, we can see how Berkeley’s idealised imagining of the ‘journey west’ is concerned with an artistic and cultural movement as much it is with an imperial one: his

---

<sup>70</sup> Berkley, p. 373.

<sup>71</sup> Turner, p. 32.



version of American progress is self-consciously literary, initiated by an exhausted Muse who seeks out 'subjects worthy fame' in America, and embodied and recorded by 'future poets' who draw fresh inspiration from this Edenic 'New World'.<sup>72</sup> Taking this into account, Wallace's images of 'westwardness' can also be seen to refer to this artistic voyage into uncharted territory, to the 'step forward' which he attempts to take in his own ambitious text. In Mark Nechtr's endeavours to name and define a new mode of post-Barthian/Ambrosian, and perhaps even 'post-postmodern', fiction ('Maybe it's called metalife. Or metafiction. Or realism. Or gfhrytytu. He doesn't know' (pp. 332–3), Wallace reflects on the literary ambitions at the heart of his story, and of *Girl* as a whole. The story's 'journey westward' can thus be read as figuring the progression of literary history attempted by both Nechtr and Wallace, a progression imagined as a linear movement from one literary generation to another.

In this notion of generational literary 'progression', Wallace invokes the presence of Harold Bloom, whose *Anxiety of Influence* outlines a model of literary history as a succession of 'strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to their death'.<sup>73</sup> For Bloom, literary influence is understood as a generational struggle, a Freudian confrontation between the 'ephebe' and their literary 'father' figure. Various critics have argued that Wallace's conflicted engagement with his postmodern predecessors can be read in relation to Bloom's theory: Harris, for example, interprets 'Westward' as a sustained engagement with, and enactment of, *The Anxiety of Influence*, arguing that Bloom's work 'is as important an intertext in "Westward" as "Funhouse"'.<sup>74</sup> In his own description of 'Westward' as an 'homage and patricidal killing thing' to Barth, Wallace drew deliberate attention to the connections between Bloom's text and his own.<sup>75</sup> Approached in this context, the story's various instances of 'westward' movement—and most pertinently the literary 'progress' coveted by both Nechtr and Wallace—figure the progression of a distinctly Bloomian version of literary history: a generational line of succession from one 'strong poet' to the next.

This reading becomes clearer when we investigate further the intertextual reference

---

<sup>72</sup> Berkeley, p. 373.

<sup>73</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> Harris, p. 122. See also Scott, Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 103. Harris's detailed reading of Wallace's engagement with Bloom centres on the argument that Wallace engages in a '*clinamen*', a 'creative misinterpretation' of 'Lost in the Funhouse'.

<sup>75</sup> Wallace, qtd. in Lipsky, p. 63.

points encoded within Wallace's image of 'westwardness'. Beyond its clear allusions to Berkeley and Leutze, the 'westward journey' of Wallace's story also signals a separate and specific literary lineage, one traceable backwards through the work of Wallace's postmodernist and modernist forebears. This can be seen by turning again to Barth, whose short story 'Water-Message' (another text from his 1968 *Lost in the Funhouse* collection, and another narrative centred around a fictionalised version of Barth named 'Ambrose') contains a further reference to westward movement. At the climax of 'Water-Message', the young Ambrose discovers a 'sea-wreathed bottle', which induces a 'greater vision, vague and splendrous':

Westward it lay, to westward, where the tide ran from East Dorset. Past the river and the Bay, from continents beyond, this messenger had come. Borne by the currents as yet uncharted, nosed by fishes as yet unnamed, it had bobbed for ages beneath strange stars. Then out of the oceans it had strayed; past cape and cove, black can, red nun, the word had wandered willy-nilly to his threshold.<sup>76</sup>

For Ambrose this water-message holds a significance bound up with its mysterious westwardness: 'Water-Message' stands as a fragmentary *Künstlerroman*, with the message-in-a-bottle's mysterious 'word' directing Ambrose on the path towards being a writer. While the bottle's message is itself almost empty of content, it has acquired meaning in the fact of its journey, a journey which Ambrose, in his westwardly-directed ambitions, seems poised to continue. Like 'Westward', 'Water-Message' invokes the context of the American cultural 'journey west' imagined by Berkeley; beyond this, however, it also points back towards a literary text which offers yet another source for Wallace's exploration of westwardness: that of James Joyce's *The Dead*.

Joyce's 1914 story—a work which, like Wallace's 'Westward', acts as both coda to and summation of the ideas explored in its surrounding collection—concludes with another instance of a symbolically suggestive journey west, as the protagonist Gabriel Conroy looks out of the window at the snow falling 'all over Ireland':

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward.<sup>77</sup>

As in Barth's and Wallace's stories, the significance of this 'journey west' remains oblique, and as such invites a number of various and potentially conflicting readings: in an essay focused on

---

<sup>76</sup> Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, p. 55.

<sup>77</sup> James Joyce, *Dubliners* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 255.

this ‘strange sentence’, Jack Foran notes how the figure of the westward journey suggests a ‘constellation of related meanings’, referring both to a projected future journey by Gabriel to the west of Ireland, and also to the human journey towards the ‘western horizon’ of death.<sup>78</sup> Beyond this, Foran argues that this journey also figures a literary progression: that within ‘The Dead’, the anticipated westward movement of Gabriel Conroy—a character who, like Ambrose and Nechtr, serves as a fictionalised version of Joyce—can be read as a statement of intent on Joyce’s part, a figure of the literary ‘next step’ which he intends to take in the writing of his modernist masterpiece *Ulysses*.<sup>79</sup> Although Gabriel’s, and Joyce’s, journey into the heart of Ireland is in many ways distinct from the American journeys found in Barth and Wallace, it nonetheless offers a model for both writers in imagining the ‘progression’ of literature as a ‘journey west’. In this figure of westward movement, Wallace invites us to trace a Bloomian line of poetic succession back to Joyce via Barth, to consider the ‘journey west’ as in each case representative of a literary ‘step forward’, from the modernism of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, to the postmodernism of Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*, to the as-yet-unnamed ‘post-postmodern’ fiction attempted (or at least described) in ‘Westward’.<sup>80</sup>

Even as he invokes this conception of a westwardly-developing line of literary ‘progress’, however, Wallace again draws attention to the problems inherent in these models of teleological, directional movement. While it is clear that ‘Westward’ engages in dialogue with *The Anxiety of Influence*, I would contest Harris’s argument that Wallace is predominantly ‘impressed’ by ‘the explanatory power of Bloom’s theory’.<sup>81</sup> Rather, across ‘Westward’ Wallace interrogates the implications of Bloom’s conception of literary ‘progress’. In its imagined succession of ‘strong poets’, Bloom’s model progresses on fundamentally linear, patriarchal terms: ‘battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads’.<sup>82</sup> By staging a version of this ‘battle’, Wallace situates himself in relation to this this developing ‘canon’, but equally highlights the limitations of Bloom’s lineage

<sup>78</sup> Jack Foran, ‘The Strange Sentence in “The Dead”’, *MLN*, 113.5 (1998), 1151–59.

<sup>79</sup> Foran prosaically glosses the ‘strange sentence’ as: ‘I, James Joyce, am now going to write a book called *Ulysses*’ (Foran, p. 1151).

<sup>80</sup> This notion of a connecting line running between Joyce, Barth, and Wallace has been posited by various critics, including Boswell (*Understanding*, p. 68) and Boddy (‘Fiction of Response’, p. 35).

<sup>81</sup> Harris, p. 132, n. 2. Later in his career Wallace made his reservations about Bloom’s writing more explicit. In *Jest*, for example, a character in one of James Incandenza’s films is described giving a lecture consisting of ‘stupefyingly turgid-sounding shit’ which sounds ‘rather suspiciously like Professor H. Bloom’s turgid studies of artistic *influenza*’ (Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 911, 1077, n. 366).

<sup>82</sup> Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp. 5, 8.

of (almost exclusively male) ‘strong’ writers.<sup>83</sup> This suggestion is supported in Wallace’s positioning of this 20<sup>th</sup> century literary tradition alongside the other problematic ‘journeys west’ invoked in ‘Westward’. By aligning this Bloomian model of linear literary progress with the connected notions of both the ‘progress’ of American national identity and the ‘progress’ of contemporary postmodernity, Wallace again leads us to consider the potential connections between these versions of teleological movement. Mark’s ‘journey’ towards a new fiction is bound up with his geographical journey across the American continent, and, as such, is directed towards the same apocalyptic destination of Steelritter’s Reunion. Drawing together these various versions of ‘westwardness’, Wallace invites the question of whether the progressing ‘canon’ of 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction has been absorbed by, and perhaps contributed to, the steadily developing hegemony of late capitalism, and whether it, too, is headed inevitably towards the telos of unrestrained commercialism envisioned by Steelritter. Beyond his direct critique of Ambrose/Barth’s ‘selling out’, Wallace raises the prospect that Mark’s—and, by extension, his own—attempts to ‘chart a new course’ for contemporary fiction might be doomed, unable to separate themselves from the ‘course of empire’.

### ‘The unmuffled engine dies’

Crucially, however, ‘Westward’’s various narratives of uneasy ‘progress’ are united in the extent to which they are delayed, interrupted, or stalled altogether. The clearest example of this failed progression is presented by the plot: the movement of Mark, D.L., and Tom towards Collision is repeatedly faced with deferrals and digressions, from their extended wait for a ride from Central Illinois Airport, to Mark’s feeling during the subsequent drive that ‘they’re *circling*. They are not, by any means, creating for themselves the shortest distance between C.I. Airport and Collision’ (p. 326). These delays culminate in a final breakdown:

The unmuffled engine dies, the jacked-up car coasting in a sudden roaring absence of homemade sound and halting in the shoulderless space between rural blacktop and bare fallow field, by the field’s ditch, in dirt, maybe a quarter-mile from where the road they’re on takes its last curve left, West, dead into Northeast Collision. All that’s there to hold your eye up ahead are three tiny

---

<sup>83</sup> Hering offers an intriguing alternative reading of Wallace’s engagement with Bloom, suggesting that ‘Westward’’s ‘amalgamated chain of influence, counter-influence and metafictional mimicry [. . .] ultimately brings the climax of the story closer to a multidirectional parodic form of *apophrades*’—a less-cited model of authorial anxiety drawn from *The Anxiety of Influence*—whereby Wallace ‘deliberately tries to force his predecessors (as well as his contemporaries) to speak in his own voice’ (Hering, *Fiction and Form*, pp. 24, 21).

rural shacks, shanties, up by the big broad leftward curve. The shanties keep you from seeing exactly where the curved road goes. (p. 341)

Like *Broom*'s array of unresolved plot threads, 'Westward's' ending denies both characters and readers the possibility of narrative resolution. The story's 'journey west' has been cut short before 'the last road takes its final Westward curve' (pp. 343–4); its terminus remains obscured, mysterious. While Wallace directly addresses readers with the assurance that his characters will, eventually, reach the Reunion—that 'in time, they'll arrive at what's been built' (p. 372)—this promised conclusion fails to materialise within the confines of the text.

Beyond these plot-level examples, this 'stalling' is further reflected in the story's form: even as Wallace describes the interruptions faced by Mark, D.L., and Sternberg, 'Westward' is formally characterised by abundant instances of textual digression and authorial interjection, breaks in the 'progress' of its narrative. These digressions—often taking the form of intrusions from the voice of 'the author'—are self-consciously signposted throughout, from sections with headings such as 'A REALLY BLATANT AND INTRUSIVE INTERRUPTION' (p. 264), to points where the narrating voice apologises for what 'may have seemed like a digression [. . .] and as of now a prolix and confusing one, and I'll say that I'm sorry, and that I am *acutely* aware of the fact that our time together is valuable. Honest' (p. 235). Despite the narrator's professed 'honesty', these apologies only draw further attention to the plot's deferred movement, the fact that 'the story isn't getting anywhere, isn't progressing in the seamless Freitagian upsweep we should have scaled by this, mss. p. 35, time' (p. 269).<sup>84</sup> In these digressions and interruptions, 'Westward' extends into a narrative and textual excess which troubles its definition as 'short' story: while it is positioned alongside the stories of *Girl*, the expansive length of 'Westward' has led to its more often being referred to as a 'novella'.<sup>85</sup> Boswell has characterised the text as resisting formal classification, having 'the page bulk of a short novel and the dramatic compression of a short story that goes on too long'.<sup>86</sup> This conception of 'Westward' as a short narrative that 'goes on too long', outstaying its welcome, is

<sup>84</sup> These authorial intrusions also serve as further intertextual echoes of 'Lost in the Funhouse', with its comparable acknowledgement that 'a long time ago we should have passed the apex of Freitag's Triangle and made brief work of the dénouement; the plot doesn't rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires' (Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*, p. 96).

<sup>85</sup> See for example Staes, who considers 'Westward' alongside *Oblivion*'s 'The Suffering Channel' as an example of Wallace's 'novellas' (Staes, "'Only Artists Can Transfigure": Kafka's Artists and the Possibility of Redemption in the Novellas of David Foster Wallace', *Orbis Litterarum*, 65.6 (2010), 459–80).

<sup>86</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 102.

useful in its illustration of the shape and project of Wallace's text. In contrast to the panoramic scope, the multiplicity of characters, locations, and voices, found in his novels, 'Westward'—in primarily restricting itself to depicting the protracted journey of its three central characters—retains the narrower focus of the other stories in *Girl*. This comparatively linear narrative is stretched to novella-length not in the scope of the story it tells, but rather in its endless deferrals, its resistance to narrative progression. As the plot progresses, Wallace's repeated promises of a 'FINAL INTERRUPTION' (p. 331) are superseded by sections with headings such as 'ACTUALLY PROBABLY NOT THE LAST INTRUSIVE INTERRUPTION' (p. 346). In the self-conscious overextension of its narrative, and the repeated delaying of its conclusion, Wallace invites us to consider 'Westward' as a short story which fails to end, a text which stretches the short-story form (and with it, the attention of its readers) up to, and perhaps beyond, breaking point.

This stalled progression is further evident in the reflexive focus which 'Westward' places on the deferrals and disruptions of its own attempts to 'move fiction forward', to carry out a Bloomian 'patricidal killing' of Barth's postmodern fiction. The interruption of this literary 'progress' is evident partially in the story's undermining of Bloom's linear model of literary history. Although Wallace's nested invocations of Barth and Joyce certainly invite consideration of 'Westward' in the context of a defined poetic 'lineage', the text as a whole consistently destabilises the directional, patrilineal structures of Bloom's theory. We have discussed above the variety of intertexts invoked by the story's recurring figure of 'westwardness'; beyond this, critics have identified numerous other points of literary reference for Wallace's story.<sup>87</sup> In establishing this multiplicity of possible intertexts, Wallace challenges any attempt to pigeonhole 'Westward' as a univocal attempt to 'outdo' Barth, and simultaneously critiques the limitations inherent in Bloom's linear model of literary influence. Following the range of 'ventriloquisms' found across *Girl*, Wallace situates 'Westward' in relation to a variety of writers and thinkers (a group which exceeds the narrow classification of 'postmodern fiction'), cumulatively offering a version of intertextual engagement more

---

<sup>87</sup> Scott, for example, reads the story as a 'virtuoso compendium of tried and true avant-garde techniques', recalling Richard Brautigan, Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut, and Pynchon (Scott, para. 11); Hayes-Brady finds possible echoes of both Stephen King and Jeffrey Farnol's 1919 novel *The Geste of Duke Jocelyn* (Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 55); Staes, meanwhile, traces the text's representation of the artist back to Kafka's short stories (Staes, 'Only Artists Can Transfigure').

complex, and more diffuse, than that allowed by the more rigid literary 'canon' offered by Bloom.

This disruption is seen most clearly in the story's extended engagement with Cynthia Ozick's 1976 story 'Usurpation (Other People's Stories)'. Along with 'Lost in the Funhouse', 'Usurpation' is acknowledged by Wallace on *Girl's* title page as one of the texts in whose 'margins' 'Westward' is self-professedly written. In the case of 'Usurpation', Wallace's intertextual engagement is evident in a passage which directly borrows from Ozick's text:

[. . .] occasionally a writer will encounter a story that is his, yet is not his. I mean, by the way, a writer of stories, not one of these intelligences that analyze society and culture, but the sort of ignorant and acquisitive being who moons after magical tales. Such a creature knows very little: how to tie a shoelace, when to go to the store for bread, and the exact stab of a story that belongs to him, and to him only. (p. 294)

This passage, which recites verbatim the opening of Ozick's story, is significant in presenting a version of intertextual relationships which already stands at odds with that described by Bloom.<sup>88</sup> Ozick's imagined writer suffers a kind of anxiety of influence in their discovery of a story which both is and is not their own: she goes on to articulate the way this anxiety is felt in the instances where 'it happens that somebody else has written the story first'.<sup>89</sup> Unlike Bloom, however, Ozick does not figure this anxiety as a necessary aspect of the 'progression' from one literary generation to another, but rather as something more chaotic and unpredictable, a product of chance which occurs only 'occasionally'.

Considering 'Usurpation' as a whole, we find Ozick developing a cumulative impression of intertextual influence as something altogether messier and more prosaic than the mythologised generational struggle imagined by Bloom. Within the story, writers are figured as 'cheats and fakes' who 'hunt themselves up in stories, sniffing out twists, insults, distortions, transfigurations, all the drek of the imagination'; later, the narrator reflects that 'what people call inspiration is only pilferage'.<sup>90</sup> Ozick frames literary influence as a form of usurpation, not in the regal, Oedipal terms laid out by Bloom, but rather as a series of thefts, borrowings and echoes between various conflicting sources:

'All stories are rip-offs', I said. 'Shakespeare stole his plots. Dostoyevski dug them out of the newspaper. Everybody steals. The Decameron's stolen.

<sup>88</sup> Cynthia Ozick, 'Usurpation (Other People's Stories)', in *Bloodshed and Three Novellas* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), pp. 131–78 (p. 131).

<sup>89</sup> Ozick, p. 131.

<sup>90</sup> Ozick, pp. 133, 160.

Whatever looks like invention is theft'.<sup>91</sup>

In 'Usurpation', literary history is imagined not as a line of succession, but an accumulation of usurpations, of attempts by writers to replace one another within the literary establishment, whether by stealing, sabotage, or flattery. These instances of literary supplanting—which do not follow a linear path (a speaker describes 'stealing from two disparate tales' by 'smash[ing] their elements one into the other')—offer an alternative to the coherent literary 'canon' imagined by Bloom.<sup>92</sup> This suggestion is further compounded by the fact that Ozick herself does not readily conform to the mould of writers generally considered as Wallace's literary 'forebears'. In comparison with the lineage of—exclusively male and white—postmodern 'father' figures cited by Wallace as the targets of his generational critique, Ozick stands apart. When asked about Ozick's influence on his work in an interview with Mark Schechner (who remarked that the two writers 'seem so different'), Wallace ironically joked that they were 'both politically active Jewish females', going on to describe Ozick as an 'immortally good pure prose writer', and noting that, despite his being 'about the goyest gentile anybody's ever met', he could nonetheless 'feel in my nerve endings the kind of stuff she is writing about'.<sup>93</sup> In his invocation of Ozick, Wallace disrupts his own ostensibly straightforward attempts to 'progress' beyond the influence of Barth's postmodernism, dismantling the impression of Barth as the sole, or even primary, 'patriarch' for his 'patricide'. Within 'Westward', D.L. Eberhardt characterises, in terms which explicitly recall those of 'Usurpation', the work of 'Professor Ambrose' as 'nothing more than the closet of a klepto with really good taste' (p. 293); across his long story, we find Wallace likewise participating in the literary pilferage which for Ozick characterises all literary composition. This aspect of 'usurpation' applies to Wallace's reading of Ozick's text itself—a story which, beyond its discussions of literary influence, is equally concerned with a series of questions surrounding religion, Jewishness, and the relationship between writing and idolatry. Here, we again find Wallace's intertextual encounters built on an incomplete reading, a fragmentary and self-serving intertextual 'theft' crystallised in 'Westward's' decontextualised

---

<sup>91</sup> Ozick, p. 161.

<sup>92</sup> Ozick, p. 157.

<sup>93</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with Mark Schechner' (2000), in *Conversations*, pp. 104–109 (pp. 108–9).



‘rip-off’ of ‘Usurpation’'s opening paragraph.<sup>94</sup> By invoking Ozick's chaotic, nonlinear model of intertextual appropriation, Wallace allows us to reframe the various intertextual ‘readings’ of ‘Westward’—and, with this, the further literary ‘forgeries’ found across *Girl* as a whole—via this more complex, shifting, and essentially incomplete conception of the ‘progress’ of literary history.

It is this incomplete ‘progression’, then, which we find reflected in the manifest unfinished-ness of ‘Westward’'s own literary project. Wallace's reflexive awareness of his failed ‘next step’ in ‘Westward’ becomes clearer when we consider again his representation of Mark Nechtr's stalled attempts to ‘sing to the *next* generation’, to find a fictional mode which will ‘progress’ beyond the influence of Barth/Ambrose. Wallace places focus on Mark's attempts to theorise what this ‘new fiction’ might look like, to make sense of its relationship with its literary forebears, and to assign it a name: we are faced variously with the suggestion that this fiction should be like a cruel lover, ‘should treat the reader like it wants to [. . .] well, fuck him’ (p. 331); that it should be ‘made out of a funhouse’, albeit one which is ‘a frictionless plane. Cool, smooth, never grasping [. . .] burnished to a mirrored gloss’, in which the ‘Exit would never be out of sight’ (p. 331–2); that it should ‘NOT be metafiction’ (p. 332), but rather ‘use metafiction as a bright smiling disguise’ (p. 333); and that it should be a ‘Trinitarian fiction’ which is ‘distinctively American’ and ‘cold as any supermarket—probably more economics than art’ (p. 347). In Mark's conceptualisations of this literary ‘next step’, ‘Westward’ reflects again on Wallace's own attempts to ‘progress’ the course of contemporary US fiction. Critics have identified clear parallels between Mark's theories of ‘Trinitarian fiction’ and Wallace's own ideals for contemporary US writing: Boswell argues that Mark serves as ‘Wallace's projection of the writer of literature's resuscitation’.<sup>95</sup> Beyond this, however, Wallace equally uses Mark's failures to place focus on the limitations of his own work, the incomplete nature of his own theories for the ‘progress’ of contemporary fiction. In the sheer

---

<sup>94</sup> A further example of Wallace's ‘pilfering’ in ‘Westward’ can be found in an unacknowledged borrowing from Don DeLillo's 1973 novel *Great Jones Street*: in the aforementioned passage detailing the writer's encounter with ‘a story that is his, yet is not his’, Wallace describes the ‘usurped’ tale as ‘menacingly alive, self-sufficient, organic, [. . .] trading chemicals briskly with the air’ (p. 294), directly echoing a sentence from *Great Jones Street*: ‘There seems a fundamental terror inside things that grow, things that trade chemicals with the air’ (Don DeLillo, *Great Jones Street* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), p. 51). DeLillo's work offers another significant source for Wallace's story: his debut novel *Americana* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), for example, offers a further point of influence in its narrative depiction of yet another American ‘journey westward’.

<sup>95</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 106.

volume of the models which he puts forward in his attempts to characterise a ‘new fiction’, Mark stretches the limits of coherence (a suggestion supported by the narrator’s characterisation of Mark as ‘a crashing chattering flapjaw, once he lets go’ (p. 347)). Mark’s assemblage of disparate and sometimes conflicting theories of literature—an assemblage which continues to accumulate and shift as the story progresses—ultimately illustrates the failures of his project.<sup>96</sup> His ‘journey’ towards a new kind of fiction, like the text’s other journeys, finds itself extended to the point of frustration, left manifestly incomplete. By drawing attention to these failures, Wallace invites us to question whether ‘Westward’ itself should be considered in the same terms.

This sense of Mark’s failure to put forward—or follow—a coherent ‘programme’ for contemporary fiction is supported when we turn to his own story, the narrative-within-a-narrative which dominates the final pages of ‘Westward’. This story, presented as the culmination of Mark’s literary ambitions, begins with a semi-autobiographical account of the troubled relationship between ‘a young competitive archer, named Dave, and his live-in lover, named L——’ (p. 356). In its personal focus and direct style, Mark’s story initially seems to follow through on his desire to escape the self-referential concerns of Ambrose/Barth’s metafiction and write something which ‘stabs’ the reader ‘in the heart’. As it progresses, however, the story falls into the same metafictional traps which it professedly aspires to overcome: as he relates the story of Dave’s murder of L——, and his subsequent trial and imprisonment, Mark is seen to ‘compromise the tale’s carefully crafted heartfelt feel and charming emotional realism’ (p. 360), shifting instead towards passages of ‘sudden, gratuitous, and worst of all *symbolic* [. . .] surrealism’ (p. 360), incongruous references to pop-cultural icons (Dave’s prison Warden is played by Jack Lord, star of ‘Hawaii Five-O’), and heavy-handed moralising discussions of ‘honour’ in contemporary culture. Perhaps most significantly, Mark’s story ‘goes on a bit longer than absolutely necessary’ (p. 357), digressing and deferring until it stretches into a textual excess which reflects the shape and structure of ‘Westward’. Mark’s failed story presents a version of Wallace’s text in miniature: from its expansive length, to its digressive narrative, to its attempts to respond to the self-conscious metafictional

---

<sup>96</sup> This array of literary ‘programmes’, of course, echoes the comparable arrangement of conflicting philosophical ‘systems’ at the end of *Broom*.

techniques of Ambrose with a further, ‘meta-metafictional’ layer of self-consciousness.<sup>97</sup> This abortive story-within-a-story serves to draw reflexive attention to the manifest failures of Wallace’s own ‘journey west’, of his own narrative’s incomplete attempts to find or enact a ‘way forward’ for contemporary American fiction.

### Westward

Even in its self-conscious failure to outline a coherent ‘next step’ for contemporary US fiction, however, I would argue that ‘Westward’ finds (or at least points towards) an aesthetic possibility within its various unfinished ‘journeys west’. Crucially, Wallace suggests that there might be something useful in these instances of failed ‘progression’—that this failure might offer an alternative to the eschatological ‘course of empire’ evoked through the story. Fest has noted how Wallace finds possibilities in the frustrated movement of his own narrative:

In refusing to actually reach Collision, Illinois [. . .] nor to end ‘Westward’ properly in any sense at all, but rather to begin another narrative about the problems inherent in constructing a narrative, Wallace simultaneously acknowledges the impossible task of forging a direction toward something else, away from the course of Empire, while holding out a hope that perhaps directionality itself, or rather eschatology, can be overturned.<sup>98</sup>

I would suggest that this desire to interrupt the inevitable ‘journey west’—to defer or halt the various forms of teleological movement which cluster around the figure of ‘westwardness’—underpins all the incompletions evoked and explored throughout Wallace’s story. Bearing this in mind, we can see how the unfinished-ness of ‘Westward’ itself—including Wallace’s inability to ‘get to the Armageddon explosion’ of, or find a way to ‘progress beyond’, the legacy of postmodern metafiction—might read as being in some way constructive.

In this suggestion of a literary failure which is somehow worthwhile or useful, Wallace invokes the presence of another key intertext: that of Samuel Beckett, who famously suggested that ‘to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail’.<sup>99</sup> In her investigation into the ‘unspeakable failures’ of Wallace’s work, Hayes-Brady suggests that, for an ‘origin’ of the kind of aesthetic

---

<sup>97</sup> The suggestion that Mark’s story is an attempt to offer an ‘authentic’ autobiographical ‘truth’ is amplified in the choice of names: by naming Mark’s fictional counterpart ‘Dave’, Wallace draws attention to Mark’s own status as a kind of distorted authorial stand-in. Of course, the fact that Mark’s autobiographical ‘honesty’ is manifested in this instance of metatextual trickery arguably also points towards the essential limitations of Mark’s, and Wallace’s, attempts at ‘authentic’ author-reader communication.

<sup>98</sup> Fest, p. 100.

<sup>99</sup> Beckett, *Proust, and Three Dialogues*, p. 125.

failure found through Wallace's writing, we should 'look to the deep failures' of Beckett, whose own conception of literary failure, she argues, emerges from the sense that, 'while to be incomplete is not necessarily to fail, to fail is necessarily incomplete'.<sup>100</sup> In Beckett's writing, we find the articulation of a literary aesthetic in which art is seen to move steadily towards silence, inarticulacy, and failure, an expression of the fact that 'there is nothing to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express'.<sup>101</sup> This conception of a literature which, even as it fails, is nonetheless compelled or obligated to 'go on', to continue in its flawed or incomplete attempts at expression, is articulated and embodied in Beckett's late work *Worstward Ho* (1983), which features the famous lines:

All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.<sup>102</sup>

In suggesting that it might be possible to 'fail better', to build on or make something out of failure, Beckett provides a model for the kind of aesthetic incompleteness which Wallace explores and enacts in 'Westward'. *Worstward Ho* is a text which continually moves towards literary failure, a text without definable plot, characters, locations, or dialogue, but which nonetheless asserts its need to 'Say on', to continue in its successive attempts to 'Try again' in a steady progression 'worstward'. In this notion of 'worstwardness', Beckett provides Wallace with a conception of literary 'movement' which stands apart from the various versions of 'westward progress' found throughout Wallace's story. While 'Westward'—with its tendency towards digression and expansion, literary and linguistic excess—is stylistically far from the spare pronouncements of *Worstward Ho*, it nevertheless arrives at a comparable point: an awareness of its own literary failure, combined with a sense that this failure might have a potential of its own.

Beyond its repeated exploration of instances of stalled progression, then, Wallace's story might be said to evoke and engage in a kind of Beckettian worstward movement, a movement which subverts and collapses the narratives of 'progress' which serve to reify the 'course of empire'. This 'journey worstward' is constructed out of an arrangement of

---

<sup>100</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 8.

<sup>101</sup> Beckett, *Proust, and Three Dialogues*, p. 103.

<sup>102</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Company / Ill Seen Ill Said / Worstward Ho / Stirrings Still* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), p. 81.

incompletions: from the failure of his characters to reach their destination, to the failure of the narrative to reach any kind of resolution or ‘ending’, to the more fundamental flaws which later caused Wallace to dismiss the story as a ‘horror show’.<sup>103</sup> In his numerous interruptions of and digressions from the ‘journey west’, Wallace thus posits ‘worstwardness’ as a kind of anti-progress: rather than succeeding in his desire to ‘move fiction forward’, Wallace rather engages in a series of unfinished attempts to do so, a series which might, perhaps, constitute a kind of movement of its own. Here, we are brought back to Connor’s reading of Beckett’s ‘finitude’—an ‘endingness’ which denotes ‘not the certainty of coming to an end, but the certainty of ending unfinished’.<sup>104</sup> It is this sense of a movement which, even in its endless extensions, only points towards an inevitable incompleteness which we find animating ‘Westward’’s various unfinished ‘journeys’. In the context of this negative ‘anti-movement’, we find Wallace’s critique of Bloom’s linear ‘progression’ of ‘strong poets’ reinforced by the tentative suggestion of an alternate literary ‘tradition’, a loose collection of writers—including Beckett, Ozick, and DeLillo—who share a concern with the nature, and potential worth, of literary incompleteness. While these writers resist categorisation in terms of a linear or coherent ‘canon’, I would argue that, in tracing lines of connection between their work, we can gain a greater understanding of the context for the engagement with unfinished-ness which we find both in ‘Westward’ and across all of Wallace’s fiction. By paying attention to the nature of the various incomplete ‘journeys’ explored, depicted, or embodied within ‘Westward’—and, with this, to the arrangement of correspondingly incomplete ‘readings’ of various literary intertexts found across the story—we can see how this uneasy example of ‘pretentious juvenilia’ is in fact crucial to our understanding of the larger project of *Girl* as a collection, and of Wallace’s fictional oeuvre as a whole.

---

<sup>103</sup> McCaffery, Wallace, p. 40.

<sup>104</sup> Connor, p. 190. In this, I diverge from Hayes-Brady, who offers a more positive reading of ‘Westward’ as offering an example of continued dialogic ‘conversation’ between reader and author, a physical enaction of ‘the Rortian continuity of dialogue that [. . .] animates the structures of Wallace’s writing’ (p. 2).

### 3. Failed Entertainment: *Infinite Jest*

#### ‘Not really a novel’

In a much-cited moment from his interview with Lipsky, Wallace characterises his second novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) as a deliberate literary failure: the novel, he notes, was initially known as ‘*A Failed Entertainment*’<sup>1</sup>—a subtitle which, according to Max, was dropped after Pietsch expressed his reservations about putting the words ‘on a book people were supposed to buy’.<sup>2</sup> On the face of it, this characterisation seems counterintuitive for a text widely regarded as Wallace’s most influential, ambitious work. Within criticism of Wallace, *Jest* has been repeatedly cited, as Hayes-Brady has noted, as Wallace’s ‘very magnumest opus’:<sup>3</sup> Boswell describes the novel as ‘both the culmination of [Wallace’s] earlier work and a remarkable expansion of his reach and ambition’;<sup>4</sup> Burn characterises it as a ‘virtuoso performance’, a ‘journey into the maelstrom of the modern self’;<sup>5</sup> while Holland confidently asserts that it is ‘the most accomplished single product of Wallace’s career, and one of the most influential works of fiction of the past 50 years’.<sup>6</sup> Despite these critical testaments to the novel’s ‘successes’, Wallace’s comments frame *Jest* as a work defined by an underlying structural failure, an intentional aspect of formal brokenness. In Wallace’s terms, *Jest*, like ‘Westward’ before it, self-consciously strains against the limits of its form: if ‘Westward’ was a short story which ‘went on too long’ then *Jest* is a correspondingly ‘failed’ novel—Wallace tells Lipsky that it is ‘not really a novel, it’s not supposed to *be* a novel’.<sup>7</sup> To what extent is our reading of *Jest* shaped by this aspect of self-professed ‘failure’? How can this enormous, ambitious, panoramic text be classified as an incomplete work, as ‘not really a novel’ at all?

In attempting to answer this question, it is worth first considering more carefully the implications of Wallace’s conception of ‘failed entertainment’. Specifically, Wallace’s phrase consciously establishes a comparison between his own novel and the lethal ‘Entertainment’ at its centre: James Incandenza’s ‘Infinite Jest’. Though it remains elusive throughout the novel—its contents related only through fragmentary, contradictory second-hand accounts—the film is

---

<sup>1</sup> Wallace, qtd. in Lipsky, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 200.

<sup>3</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. viii.

<sup>4</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, pp. 117–8.

<sup>5</sup> Burn, *Reader’s Guide*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Holland, ‘*Infinite Jest*’, in *Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, pp. 127–41 (p. 127).

<sup>7</sup> Wallace, qtd. in Lipsky, p. 78.

nonetheless situated, as Boswell has argued, ‘firmly at the core of the story’, offering a point of connection between *Jest*’s various disparate narrative threads.<sup>8</sup> From the limited information we are given, we learn that ‘Jest’ is so completely entertaining that it induces a state of total passive spectation in its audience: viewers of the film are left ‘blank, as if on some deep reptile-brain level pithed’, wanting ‘nothing else ever in life but to see it again, and then again, and so on’—a compulsion finally resulting in their deaths.<sup>9</sup> Through *Jest*, the ‘Entertainment’ is encountered most frequently in terms of these lethal effects: as, for example, in the case of the ‘Near Eastern medical attaché’ (p. 78) whose experience watching and re-watching an endless ‘recursive loop’ of the film—his ‘rictus of a face’ all the while displaying a ‘positive, ecstatic’ expression (p. 54)—is described intermittently across the novel’s first hundred pages. In many respects, Incandenza’s film can be seen to stand as a ‘so-called perfect Entertainment’ (p. 318), a grotesque vision of an artwork so ‘complete’, so ‘successful’, that its audience cannot tear their eyes away from the screen. In their shared titles, Wallace invites inevitable comparison between Incandenza’s film and his own novel: like Mark’s final story in ‘Westward’, Bruce’s coldly technological poetry in ‘Here and There’, or Rick’s thinly-veiled autobiographies in *Broom*, Incandenza’s ‘Infinite Jest’ offers a further instance of an artwork-within-the-artwork, a (distorted) reflection of its containing text.<sup>10</sup> While critics have identified aspects of correspondence between the strategies of film and novel,<sup>11</sup> Wallace’s own characterisation of *Jest* as a ‘failed’ entertainment establishes an apparent antithesis between the two: indeed, Wallace explicitly tells Lipksy that the novel is structured as ‘entertainment that doesn’t work’ precisely because ‘what entertainment ultimately leads to, I think, is the movie *Infinite Jest*’.<sup>12</sup> In establishing this dichotomy, Wallace continues to gesture—as he did at the end of ‘Westward’—towards an aesthetic possibility *within* literary failure. Where ‘Infinite Jest’ offers a horrifying manifestation of a ‘perfect’ entertainment—a vision of ‘what entertainment

<sup>8</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 549. Further references to *Jest* in this chapter will be placed in parentheses in the text.

<sup>10</sup> This recurring use of ‘nested narratives’ in Wallace’s fiction has been explored further by Hering, who suggests that Wallace’s fictional artworks can be understood in terms of Lucien Dällenbach’s theory of *mise-en-abyme*: in his nested narratives, Wallace offers a ‘reflection of the text within the text’, in a strategy comparable to that of *Hamlet*’s ‘play-within-a-play’ (Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 86).

<sup>11</sup> Frank Louis Cioffi for example, has argued that the novel is itself ‘addictive’ in the same way as Incandenza’s film, going so far as to suggest that ‘[t]o read *Infinite Jest* is, almost, to watch the fatal videotape’ (Frank Louis Cioffi, “‘An Anguish Become Thing’: Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*”, *Narrative*, 2000, 161–181 (p. 171).

<sup>12</sup> Wallace, qtd. in Lipsky, p. 79.

ultimately leads to’—*Infinite Jest* thus presents us with a potential alternative to this finality, a constructive, deliberate incompleteness.<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, however, Incandenza’s film and Wallace’s novel are apparently united by a shared aesthetic project. Echoing Wallace’s description of fiction as ‘an act of communication between one human being and another’, Incandenza’s ‘Jest’ is figured as an attempt on the director’s part to *communicate*, not merely in the generalised terms of artist/audience ‘connection’, but rather specifically with his son Hal.<sup>14</sup> Late in the novel, Incandenza—who, having killed himself before the beginning of *Jest*’s narrative, appears as a mysterious, posthumous ‘wraith’—recalls his distress at witnessing Hal’s withdrawal into a state of noncommunicative depression, a ‘retreat to the periphery of life’s frame’ (p. 837). He goes on to relate how, in response to this ‘retreat’,

he spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*. [. . .] His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. (pp. 838–839)

For Incandenza, the ‘entertainment’ offered by his final film is presented as a means of ‘conversing’ with his inaccessible son, an attempt to draw Hal ‘out of himself’ (p. 839). While this longed-for communication is figured in specific, father/son terms, Incandenza also links it with his broader, ‘life-long dream’ for his art, a dream unrecognised by ‘scholars and Foundations and disseminators’: ‘to *entertain*’ (p. 839). Read in these terms, we can see how Incandenza’s film presents us with a troubling version of communicative ‘success’: Incandenza—who asserts his belief that ‘[a]ny conversation or interchange is better than none at all’ (p. 839)—finally succeeds in his desire to use his art to ‘connect’ with his audience, to draw them ‘out of themselves’. In its tranquilising, lethal form of passive spectatorial pleasure, however, the film offers a communication which is disturbingly one-sided, a violently monologic exchange in which, in its totalising ‘completion’, leaves no space for the viewer to engage with or respond to the work.

In stark contrast to this, Wallace’s *Jest* rejects the totalising strategies of Incandenza’s film in favour of something self-consciously broken, something which, in its unfinished-ness,

---

<sup>13</sup> In many respects, Incandenza’s film offers a uniquely concrete manifestation of the treatment of completion or closure as ‘a kind of death, death as a kind of perfection’ which, according to Hayes-Brady, defines Wallace’s writing (Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 3).

<sup>14</sup> Wallace, ‘Greatly Exaggerated’, p. 144.



demands an active interpretative engagement on the part of the reader. In its excessive length, its frequent lexical difficulty, its use of (frequently expansive) endnotes, Wallace's text demands a mode of reading which—while potentially pleasurable—is anything but passive. In his interview with McCaffery Wallace outlines in greater detail the strategies by which he attempts to distinguish his own writing from the 'passive spectation' offered by commercial entertainment:

It's supposed to be uneasy. For instance, using a lot of flash-cuts between scenes so that some of the narrative arrangement has got to be done by the reader, or interrupting flow with digressions and interpolations that the reader has to do the work of connecting to each other and to the narrative. It's nothing terribly sophisticated, and there has to be an accessible payoff for the reader if I don't want the reader to throw the book at the wall. But if it works right, the reader has to fight *through* the mediated voice presenting the material to you.<sup>15</sup>

Wallace emphasises the extent to which his fiction requires a readerly 'work', demanding a process of 'fighting *through*' the text wholly antithetical to the pacifying strategies of Incandenza's 'entertainment'.<sup>16</sup> This chapter, then, investigates more closely the kind of 'work' modelled and demanded by the incomplete structure of Wallace's novel, addressing in particular the ways in which *Jest*'s manifest *bigness*—its panoramic, and sometimes excessive size and scope—establishes a tension between the possibility of literary 'totality' and a concurrent suggestion of inevitable incompleteness. Through this, the chapter will thus explore how *Jest*'s formal 'failures' work to fundamentally shape our interpretation, establishing a (broken) frame for our own, correspondingly 'unfinished', reading of Wallace's text.

### 'Total Data'

In considering the formal qualities of *Jest*, it is difficult not to define the novel in terms of its expansiveness: at 1079 pages, the text stands apart from Wallace's previous (and subsequent) work in both its broadened scope—with its huge cast of tennis students, recovering drug addicts, and Québécois terrorists—and its extended length. Boswell notes that what 'every reviewer and reader of *Infinite Jest* must first contend with is the book's sheer bulk, its massive

<sup>15</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with McCaffery', p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> With this, Wallace is aware of the potentially alienating consequences of this 'antagonistic strategy'—the danger that, without an aspect of 'accessible payoff', the reader will eventually 'throw the book at the wall'. Within *Jest*, we find this danger self-consciously addressed in the descriptions of Incandenza's experimental '*après-garde*' film work—work which, in its total focus on antagonising its audience, is largely 'just plain pretentious and unengaging and bad' (p. 64).

size. The length is at once a challenge, a threat, and an enticement'.<sup>17</sup> Since its publication, a subsection of commentators have read the novel's 'bulk' as constituting a failure in its own right: in an ambivalent *New York Times* review, Kakutani characterised *Jest* as

a vast, encyclopedic compendium of whatever seems to have crossed Mr. Wallace's mind. [. . .] The book seems to have been written and edited (or not edited) on the principle that bigger is better, more means more important, and this results in a big psychedelic jumble of characters, anecdotes, jokes, soliloquies, reminiscences and footnotes, uproarious and mind-boggling, but also arbitrary and self-indulgent.<sup>18</sup>

For Kakutani, *Jest*'s bigness is figured as a failure of concision and organisation: although she acknowledges that '[s]omewhere in the mess [. . .] are the outlines of splendid novel', the text's 'random muchness of detail and incident' are taken as evidence of a lack of authorial or editorial discipline, 'an excuse for Mr. Wallace to simply show off his remarkable skills as a writer'.<sup>19</sup>

Even as it critiques the ostensible disorganisation of *Jest*, however, Kakutani's description of the text's 'encyclopedic' qualities introduces a specific—and enduringly influential—contextual model for approaching the bigness of Wallace's novel. In its panoramic scope, *Jest* seems to consciously invite consideration in terms of the forms and strategies of encyclopaedic thought: a mode of thinking which, as defined by Kiron Ward in a recent study of fictional encyclopaedism, 'summarises and organises all knowledge within a totalising epistemological framework'.<sup>20</sup> In Ward's terms, encyclopaedias present us with a 'totalised version of reality', an attempt to 'paint a complete and coherent picture of our world and universe'.<sup>21</sup> This notion of a totalising, 'complete' textual account of the world is one which informs Wallace's thinking across his career: in 'Little Expressionless Animals', for example, *Jeopardy!*-champion Julie Smith's vast knowledge of trivia is founded on her capacity to memorise the contents of 'an obscure and limited-edition Canadian encyclopedia called *LaPlace's Guide to Total Data*'.<sup>22</sup> In its sheer massiveness *Jest* finds Wallace gesturing towards, and arguably attempting to formally embody, this 'Total Data', this imagined

<sup>17</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 118.

<sup>18</sup> Michiko Kakutani, 'Books of the Times; A Country Dying of Laughter. In 1,079 Pages: review of *Infinite Jest*', *New York Times*, 13 February 1996, para. 3 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/13/books/books-of-the-times-a-country-dying-of-laughter-in-1079-pages.html>> [accessed 21 July 2019].

<sup>19</sup> Kakutani, 'Review of *Infinite Jest*', paras. 11, 14, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Kiron Ward, *Fictional Encyclopaedism in James Joyce, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Roberto Bolaño: Towards a Theory of Literary Totality* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2017), p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ward, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair*, p. 10.

comprehensive textual ‘completion’.

It has become something of a critical commonplace to approach *Jest* as an encyclopaedic novel<sup>23</sup>—and particularly, an example of the particular ‘Encyclopedic Narrative’ described by Edward Mendelson in his influential 1976 essay of the same name.<sup>24</sup> Mendelson’s essay offers a notably specific conception of encyclopaedic literature, arguing that

Each major national culture in the west, as it becomes aware of itself as a separate entity, produces an encyclopedic author, one whose work attends to the whole social and linguistic range of his nation, who makes use of all the literary styles and conventions known to his countrymen, whose dialect often becomes established as the national language, who takes his place as national poet or national classic, and who becomes the focus of a large and persistent exegetic and textual industry comparable to the industry founded upon the Bible.<sup>25</sup>

In Mendelson’s grandiose terms, each encyclopaedic novel is defined as such by its attempt to offer a comprehensive account of its respective ‘national culture’, a textual summing-up of the ‘whole social and linguistic range’ of its surrounding society. Mendelson’s framework is strikingly narrow in its scope—he claims to know of ‘only seven’ examples of encyclopaedic narrative—with these texts thus positioned as a series of singular, ‘complete’ masterworks, texts which, in their self-conscious massiveness, point towards a kind of literary totality.<sup>26</sup> We can see, then, how *Jest* seems to invite reading in the totalising terms of Mendelsohn’s encyclopaedism. Mendelson significantly notes that an ‘encyclopedic narrative is, among other things, an encyclopedia of narrative’, and we find this clearly manifested in *Jest*’s vast collection of narrative and linguistic styles and forms: from its assortment of voices (ranging between the insufferably pretentious ‘U.S. Academese’ (p. 1056, n. 304) of Geoffrey Day’s essay on *Les Assassins de Fauteuils Rollents* and the slang-inflected inarticulacy of ‘yrstruly’’s account of life as a homeless drug addict (p. 128)); to its complex arrangement of formally diverse textual fragments (including first-person monologues, email exchanges, magazine interviews, extracts from academic essays, transcripts of meetings, and a nine-page filmography of Incandenza’s work); to its appropriation and employment of numerous technical jargons (culminating in Michael Pemulis’s unapologetically dense discussion of mathematical formulae,

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Boswell, Preface to *Long Thing*, pp. vi–xi (p. vii); Burn, *Reader’s Guide*, p. 27; Hering, ‘Form as Strategy’, in *Critical Insights*, pp. 128–43 (p. 128); Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Mendelson, ‘Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon’, *MLN*, 91.6 (1976), 1267–75.

<sup>25</sup> Mendelson, p. 1268.

<sup>26</sup> Mendelson, p. 1267. Mendelson’s encyclopaedic canon consists of ‘Dante’s *Commedia*, Rabelais’ five books of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Goethe’s *Faust*, Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and finally ‘Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*’ (Mendelson, p. 1267).

complete with in-text line graphs, in one of the novel's footnotes (p. 1023, n. 123)).<sup>27</sup>

Looking beyond Mendelson, *Jest*'s encyclopaedic scope can further be read as invoking a series of further related (and often overlapping) critical models of literary 'totality'. In many respects, the novel's self-evident expansiveness points us back towards the older (and more vaguely conceptualised) notion of the 'Great American Novel'—a canon stretching back at least to Melville's *Moby-Dick*. In his recent monograph on the history and development of the 'dream of the Great American Novel', Lawrence Buell notes how, despite its perennial status as an empty 'media cliché'—one which 'self-respecting literary critics' at least pretend 'not to take seriously'—the 'G.A.N.' has 'refused to die'.<sup>28</sup> Boddy asserts that the Great American Novel has continued to serve as a critical/journalistic 'benchmark for literary prestige, ambition, and sales', coming to stand as a 'recognizable genre' in its own right—one characterised by a series of 'recognizable conventions', including a 'reliance on national microcosm and representative characters', a 'length-justifying claim to "complete and whole articulation"', and a reliably 'macho reputation'.<sup>29</sup> While the G.A.N. unquestionably intersects with Mendelson's conception of encyclopaedic narrative—Mendelson, of course, imagines an encyclopaedism explicitly bound up with the reflection of a 'national culture', while Boddy notes how the G.A.N. is likewise characterised by an 'encyclopaedic impulse', a drive towards 'roaming and cataloguing', capturing 'the "billion forms" of the nation'<sup>30</sup>—it also carries the suggestion of a specifically American ideal of expansiveness, a reflection of what Buell refers to as the 'heady challenge of getting a whale-sized country between the covers'.<sup>31</sup>

In *Jest*, we find Wallace self-consciously establishing his novel's dialogue with, and perhaps its participation in, this longer tradition of panoramic American fictions. Certainly, more than any of Wallace's preceding novels or stories, *Jest* is explicitly concerned with

<sup>27</sup> Mendelson, p. 1270, emphasis added. Boswell goes so far as to suggest that 'Wallace wrote his encyclopedias with Mendelson's definition firmly in mind', and as such that 'his novels not only epitomize the form but also interrogate and parody it' (Boswell, preface to *Long Thing*, p. viii).

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 1. The notion of the Great American Novel was, as Buell acknowledges, 'born a century and a half ago, in the wake of the Civil War' (p. 1), originating in an essay by John William De Forest, in which he characterised the G.A.N. as 'the picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence', an attempt to paint 'the American soul within the framework of a novel' ('The Great American Novel', *The Nation*, 9 January 1868, pp. 27–28).

<sup>29</sup> Kasia Boddy, 'Lynne Tillman and the Great American Novel', *Electronic Book Review*, 2011, para. 7 <<https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/lynne-tillman-and-the-great-american-novel/>> [accessed 22 July 2019].

<sup>30</sup> Boddy, 'Lynne Tillman and the Great American Novel', paras. 13, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Buell, p. 13.

questions of national identity: in an interview conducted shortly after its publication, Wallace related how he ‘wanted to do something real American, about what it’s like to live in America around the millennium’.<sup>32</sup> This developing focus is most prominent in the novel’s political subplot concerning the government of the now-‘interdependent’ ‘Organization of North American Nations’ (presided over by ‘Johnny Gentle, Famous Crooner’ (p. 381)), and its attempts to obtain the master copy of the ‘Infinite Jest’ film. While this broadly-drawn background surfaces usually only at the edges of *Jest*’s narrative, it supports the sense of Wallace attempting to address and respond to ‘the millennial fulcrum of very dark U.S. times’ (p. 382). In the extended dialogues between Hugh Steeply (an O.N.A.N. agent) and Rémy Marathe (a member of Quebecois *A.F.R.*), for example, the novel’s central concerns—with questions of art and entertainment, addiction and worship, attention and surrender—are situated on a national scale, as the two men discuss the relationship between the lethal ‘entertainment’ (an entertainment which is, crucially, a ‘U.S.A. production’), and a broader culture of American individualism, wherein ‘people choose nothing over themselves to love, each one’ (p. 318).<sup>33</sup> In light of this specific concern with American identity, the length of *Jest* can thus be seen to direct us towards this lineage of ‘Great’ (or, alternatively, just ‘Big’) American texts, works in which, as Boddy argues, ‘America is not just their setting, but also their subject’.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond this, *Jest* can also be seen to situate itself in relation to a more specifically contemporary model of literary expansion. Burn notes that the novel’s

erudite form most clearly recalls the tradition of massive fictions written by older postmodernists that began with William Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*, and includes later works such as *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Gaddis’s second novel, *J R* (1975) and DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997).<sup>35</sup>

While Mendelson’s conception of ‘encyclopedic narrative’ again overlaps with this tradition—taking *Gravity’s Rainbow* as its jumping-off point—these huge postmodern works seem to offer a particular iteration of this encyclopaedism, a massiveness which reflects and responds to the uniquely overwhelming ‘totality’ of late-20<sup>th</sup> century experience. This more recent lineage of

<sup>32</sup> Wallace, ‘Interview with Miller’, p. 59. This concern builds, of course, on the figure of American ‘progress’ which ran through ‘Westward’.

<sup>33</sup> Wallace’s engagement with questions of US identity has been explored in greater detail by Giles, who discusses ‘the author’s own intense capacity for self-interrogation about what it means to be an “American” writer at the beginning of the twenty-first century’ (Giles, ‘All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature’, in *Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, pp. 3–22 (pp. 3–4)).

<sup>34</sup> Boddy, ‘Lynne Tillman and the Great American Novel’, para. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Burn, *Reader’s Guide*, p. 27.

‘massive fictions’ has been conceptualised in various terms: from Frederick Karl’s ‘Mega-Novel’,<sup>36</sup> to more recent studies of ‘maximalist fiction’ by Stefano Ercolino and Nick Levey.<sup>37</sup> While there are significant points of difference between these various models,<sup>38</sup> they share a sense of reading the expansiveness of these texts as responding to the complexity and fragmentation of contemporary experience: Karl, for example, characterises the ‘mega-novel’ as a specific ‘response to postwar America as an indeterminate, problematic, unfixed place’.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the most pertinent characterisation, however, is found in Tom LeClair’s conception of the ‘systems novel’, as laid out in his 1988 study *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, and expanded upon in *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction* (1989).<sup>40</sup> Like Mendelson, LeClair is concerned with defining, and asserting the value of, a certain kind of ‘large book’, a group of late-20<sup>th</sup> century US novels which LeClair argues are united in exploring

the size and scale of contemporary experience: how multiplicity and magnitude create new relations and new proportions among persons and entities, how quantity affects quality, how massiveness is related to mastery.<sup>41</sup>

For LeClair, the very massiveness of these ‘long, large, and dense’ texts is bound up with their attempts to present readers with vast, complex ‘systems of information’: these ‘systems novels’ strive, in their expansiveness, to ‘comprehend, represent, and critique’ a contemporary culture itself ‘largely composed of huge systems of information, both ideological and institutional, that exert power over individuals and their groups’.<sup>42</sup> This model of the ‘systems novel’ seems particularly relevant, in part because LeClair himself, in an early essay on *Jest*, explicitly

<sup>36</sup> Frederick R. Karl, ‘American Fictions: The Mega-Novel’, *Conjunctions*, 7, 1985, 248–60.

<sup>37</sup> See, respectively, Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño’s 2666* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Nick Levey, *Maximalism in Contemporary American Literature: The Uses of Detail* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> These differences include the question of whether these novels constitute a uniquely American phenomenon (as in Karl’s problematically narrow assertion that ‘Mega-Novels’ are written primarily by US ‘white protestant males’ (Karl, p. 258)), or whether this tendency towards maximalism can be found across the world (Ercolino, for example, cites Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* and the Babette Factory’s *2005 dopo cristo* as clear global examples of maximalist fiction).

<sup>39</sup> Karl, p. 249.

<sup>40</sup> Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

<sup>41</sup> LeClair, *Art of Excess*, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> LeClair, *Art of Excess*, pp. 6, 14. LeClair’s notion of ‘systems’ recalls the various competing philosophical systems which confronted us in *Broom*.

characterised Wallace's novel as part of this tradition,<sup>43</sup> but also because Wallace was in turn familiar with LeClair's writing—a familiarity evidenced in Wallace's own heavily marked-up copy of *In the Loop*, held in his archive at the Harry Ransom Center. Various critics have suggested *Jest* finds Wallace engaging in a conscious dialogue with LeClair's work: Graham Foster, for example, argues that Wallace 'place[s] *Infinite Jest* in the tradition of the "systems novel", revealing Wallace's attention to his own position in the American literary canon',<sup>44</sup> while Hering notes that 'the presence of extensive notes in Wallace's own copy of [*In the Loop*] suggests that LeClair's work was influential on Wallace's ideas of form'.<sup>45</sup>

At the centre of LeClair's model is the notion of a contemporary informational 'overload', one reflected in the 'excess' of these massive texts:

Overload results when the rate of information [. . .] becomes too high for the receiver to process, to sort and integrate within his operative categories. In an artificial channel, overload can cause a short circuit or, on a computer terminal, a blank screen. In a novel, overload—or what I call excess—can stop the reading, cause scanning, or produce a reorientation to the novel's information.<sup>46</sup>

For LeClair, this 'overload' can be considered the 'dominant strategy' of the systems novel: these reflexive efforts to interrupt the process of reading provide the foundation for what LeClair terms 'the *art* of excess', an art which responds to a contemporary culture in which 'the scale of information has increased' at an unprecedented rate.<sup>47</sup> LeClair concludes that, in representing and mimicking the fragmentary complexity of these informational systems, the 'systems novel' thus serves as an attempt to attain a kind of 'mastery' over both the reader and this excess itself: '[e]xcess', he argues, 'represents and critiques excess'.<sup>48</sup> In this, LeClair echoes Mendelson's claim for the encyclopaedic novel's capacity to 'render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture': as with the various other models of literary 'totality' invoked within *Jest*, the systems novel is characterised by a panoramic comprehensiveness, a suggestion of a text which is able to take on, and thus 'master', the chaos

---

<sup>43</sup> Tom LeClair, 'The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 38.1 (1996), 12–37. LeClair groups Wallace with Powers and Vollmann as writers of 'prodigious fictions', inheritors of the 'systems novel' who, having been 'educated in the Age of Information', have thus 'acquired an expertise nowhere evident in the work of the previous generation' (p. 13).

<sup>44</sup> Graham Foster, 'A Deep Insider's Elegiac Tribute: The Work of Don DeLillo in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 4.2 (2016), 1–20 (p. 2) <<https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.127>>.

<sup>45</sup> Hering, 'Form as Strategy', p. 131.

<sup>46</sup> LeClair, *Art of Excess*, p. 15.

<sup>47</sup> LeClair, *Art of Excess*, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> LeClair, *Art of Excess*, pp. 15, 17.

of the contemporary world.<sup>49</sup>

To a certain extent, the textual excesses of *Jest* can be read as presenting a version of the ‘overload’ outlined by LeClair. Perhaps the clearest example of this is found in *Jest*’s ‘Notes and Errata’, the 388 endnotes which occupy the novel’s final 96 pages. In a 1994 letter to his editor Michael Pietsch, Wallace defended his (relatively late) addition of endnotes to the novel, arguing that the notes serve both to ‘allow/make the reader go literally physically “back and forth” in a way that perhaps cutely mimics some of the story’s thematic concerns’, and also to ‘mimic the information-flood and data-triage I expect’d be an even bigger part of US life 15 years hence’.<sup>50</sup> While their content varies wildly—Ira Nadel has noted how they shift between ‘the informative, the interpretative, and the narrative’, working variously to ‘fracture, intimidate, layer, expand, frustrate, revise, critique, and support the text’—the notes collectively offer a supplementary excess of language and data to the novel’s already maximalist text.<sup>51</sup> Many of these notes are themselves excessive in terms of length and content, presenting either lengthy catalogues of information (as in Incandenza’s filmography), or otherwise with chapter-length narrative passages outside the main body of the text (as in note 110, which runs between pages 1004–1022, and includes 12 of its own sub-endnotes). Even the briefest and most apparently cursory of the endnotes, however, demonstrate a kind of textual surplus, a spilling-over of the novel’s limits.

### ‘Too Much’

Even as it invokes these various overlapping models of encyclopaedism, however, *Jest* can simultaneously be seen to disrupt and frustrate this notion of textual ‘completion’, offering a manifestation of literary ‘totality’ which is self-consciously incomplete: Levey suggests that ‘it becomes clear that as much as it wants to dazzle us with its power, *Infinite Jest* also wants to evade or even sabotage fantasies of literary value and greatness by being dysfunctional’.<sup>52</sup> We

---

<sup>49</sup> Mendelson, p. 1269. Surveying Wallace’s copy of LeClair’s *In the Loop*, it is clear that Wallace was intrigued by this notion of mastery via textual excess: in a passage where LeClair lays out his conception of systems novels as ‘mastering works’ which have the potential to ‘transform the reader’s understanding of wholes, rather than please his engineered appetite for parts’, Wallace marks the entire paragraph with the marginal comment: ‘NICE’ (Wallace, marginal inscription in LeClair, *In the Loop*, p. 12. Copy held in Wallace’s Library, Harry Ransom Center).

<sup>50</sup> Wallace, letter to Pietsch, qtd. in Max, *Every Love Story*, pp. 195–196.

<sup>51</sup> Ira B. Nadel, ‘Consider the Footnote’ in *Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, pp. 218–240 (p. 233).

<sup>52</sup> Levey, p. 26.



find evidence of this dysfunction if we consider more closely the nature of *Jest*'s textual excesses. While confronting us with a textual 'overload', *Jest* denies the 'mastery' which LeClair assigns to the systems novel. Through the novel, we are faced with a consistent sense of 'too much' text: from endlessly digressive sentences (such as that describing the horrifying death of Lucien Antittoi, which stretches between pages 487 and 489), to passages swelled by apparently superfluous data (such as the absurdly detailed account of the tennis/war game 'Eschaton' (pp. 321–342), complete with endless technical abbreviations, byzantine rules, and mathematical formulae), to absurdly-extended section headings:

WHY — THOUGH IN THE EARLY DAYS OF INTERLACE'S  
 INTERNETTED TELEPUTERS THAT OPERATED OFF LARGELY THE  
 SAME FIBER-DIGITAL GRID AS THE PHONE COMPANIES, THE  
 ADVENT OF VIDEO-TELEPHONING (A.K.A. 'VIDEOPHONY') ENJOYED  
 AN INTERVAL OF HUGE CONSUMER POPULARITY — CALLERS  
 THRILLED AT THE IDEA OF PHONE-INTERFACING BOTH AURALLY  
 AND FACIALLY (THE LITTLE FIRST-GENERATION PHONE-VIDEO  
 CAMERAS BEING TOO CRUDE AND NARROW-APERTURED FOR  
 ANYTHING MUCH MORE THAN FACIAL CLOSE-UPS) ON FIRST-  
 GENERATION TELEPUTERS THAT AT THAT TIME WERE LITTLE  
 MORE THAN HIGH-TECH TV SETS, THOUGH OF COURSE THEY HAD  
 THAT LITTLE 'INTELLIGENT-AGENT' HOMUNCULAR ICON THAT  
 WOULD APPEAR AT THE LOWER-RIGHT OF A BROADCAST/CABLE  
 PROGRAM AND TELL YOU THE TIME AND TEMPERATURE OUTSIDE  
 OR REMIND YOU TO TAKE YOUR BLOOD-PRESSURE MEDICATION  
 OR ALERT YOU TO A PARTICULARLY COMPELLING  
 ENTERTAINMENT OPTION NOW COMING UP ON CHANNEL LIKE 491  
 OR SOMETHING, OR OF COURSE NOW ALERTING YOU TO AN  
 INCOMING VIDEO-PHONE CALL AND THEN TAP-DANCING WITH A  
 LITTLE ICONIC STRAW BOATER AND CANE JUST UNDER A MENU  
 OF POSSIBLE OPTIONS FOR RESPONSE, AND CALLERS DID LOVE  
 THEIR LITTLE HOMUNCULAR ICONS — BUT WHY, WITHIN LIKE 16  
 MONTHS OR 5 SALES QUARTERS, THE TUMESCENT DEMAND  
 CURVE FOR 'VIDEOPHONY' SUDDENLY COLLAPSED LIKE A KICKED  
 TENT, SO THAT, BY THE YEAR OF THE DEPEND ADULT  
 UNDERGARMENT, FEWER THAN 10% OF ALL PRIVATE TELEPHONE  
 COMMUNICATIONS UTILIZED ANY VIDEO-IMAGE-FIBER  
 DATATRANSFERS OR COINCIDENT PRODUCTS AND SERVICES, THE  
 AVERAGE U.S. PHONE-USER DECIDING THAT S/HE ACTUALLY  
 PREFERRED THE RETROGRADE OLD LOW-TECH BELL-ERA VOICE-  
 ONLY TELEPHONIC INTERFACE AFTER ALL, A PREFERENTIAL  
 ABOUT-FACE THAT COST A GOOD MANY PRECIPITANT VIDEO-  
 TELEPHONY-RELATED ENTREPRENEURS THEIR SHIRTS, PLUS  
 DESTABILIZING TWO HIGHLY RESPECTED MUTUAL FUNDS THAT  
 HAD GROUNDFOOLED HEAVILY IN VIDEO-PHONE TECHNOLOGY,  
 AND VERY NEARLY WIPING OUT THE MARYLAND STATE  
 EMPLOYEES' RETIREMENT SYSTEM'S FREDDIE-MAC FUND, A FUND  
 WHOSE ADMINISTRATOR'S MISTRESS'S BROTHER HAD BEEN AN  
 ALMOST MANICALLY PRECIPITANT VIDEO-PHONETECHNOLOGY  
 ENTREPRENEUR . . . AND BUT SO WHY THE ABRUPT CONSUMER  
 RETREAT BACK TO GOOD OLD VOICE-ONLY TELEPHONING?

(pp. 144–5)

In its layers-upon-layers of superfluous subclauses, digressions, asides, and colloquial interjections—and, indeed, its visual bulk on the printed page—the videophony chapter’s title presents a maximalism which feels unsettlingly unmanaged and unmanageable: Holland suggests that, at times, ‘the novel’s explosion of voices and of jargon’ threatens to ‘collapse under the weight of its collective uselessness’, or otherwise ‘atomize into a wash of white noise’.<sup>53</sup> Across *Jest*, we are confronted with comparable instances of ‘too much’ language—excess which, as Giles notes, sometimes makes the work of reading a ‘gruelling’ process, mirroring the novel’s ‘sombre depiction of American culture as a spiral of obsessions and compulsions, a labyrinthine system from which there is no escape’.<sup>54</sup> Rather than asserting its claim to LeClair’s imagined ‘mastery’ over reader and world, *Jest*’s excess is consistently framed in terms of a fundamental *non*-mastery: an uncontrollable, and sometimes unsettling, sense of the ‘too much’.

This sense of a ‘failed’ expansiveness, an unmanageable excess, is felt equally in *Jest*’s engagement with questions of American-ness. In its speculative depiction of a near-future US society, Wallace evokes an America which has itself become ‘too much’: in ‘continental Reconfiguration’ (p. 92) which resulted in the formation of the Organization of North American Nations, the US is imagined as having exceeded its national boundaries, absorbing Canada and Mexico into little more than ‘sort of post-millennial American protectorates’ (p. 384). In this process of ‘U.S. Experialism’ (p. 385), Wallace presents us with a uniquely late-20<sup>th</sup> century vision of the American ‘progress’ which he interrogated in ‘Westward’: within Mario Incandenza’s cinematic retelling of the birth of O.N.A.N., President Gentle claims to have ‘decided we’re going to reinvent not just government but history. Torch the past. Manifest a new destiny’ (pp. 402–3). Here, the historical ‘journey westward’ of American ‘empire’ has been reimagined as an ‘experialist’ movement *outwards*: an excessive, unmanageable growth beyond the limits of ‘America’ or ‘American-ness’. This sense of uncontrollable territorial excess is crystallised most clearly in the figure of the ‘Great Concavity’: the ‘vast stretches of

---

<sup>53</sup> Holland, ‘*Infinite Jest*’, p. 130. See also David Letzler, who explores the ‘junk text’ (which he terms ‘cruft’)—text ‘simultaneously too excessive and too vacuous to be worth anyone’s attention’—found throughout *Jest*. For Letzler, this ‘cruft’ is figured as ‘the characteristic text of encyclopedic novels’ (Letzler, ‘Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction’, in *Long Thing*, pp. 127–147 (p. 131).

<sup>54</sup> Giles, ‘Sentimental Posthumanism’, p. 334. This ‘too much’ notably resonates with the novel’s parallel exploration of the horrifying excesses of drug addiction (as, for example, in the euphemistic ‘Too Much Fun’ (p. 238) by which Joelle van Dyne privately designates her own attempted suicide by drug overdose).

U.S. territory' which—having been transformed into 'uninhabitable and probably barbed-wired landfills and fly-shrouded dumps and saprogenic magenta-fogged toxic-disposal sites' (p. 402)—have been excised from the US altogether, transferred to Canada in an ostensibly generous act of 'Experialistic "gift" or "return"' (p. 58). Giles argues that

*Infinite Jest* thus not only critiques the idea of American exceptionalism experientially, showing how US citizens are becoming more uneasy as their borders become more permeable, but also demystifies it politically: in a multinational, interdependent world, the notion of the US as a protected, pristine space has been rendered null and void.<sup>55</sup>

In this geographically excessive, unstable vision of the US, *Jest* problematises its own claim to offer a 'complete' literary depiction of or response to the chaotic world of late-20<sup>th</sup> century America. While the panoramic reach of Wallace's novel echoes the encyclopaedic 'greatness' of American texts such as *Moby-Dick* (Andrew Hoberek, for example has explored in detail how *Jest* echoes the 'digressive qualities' of Melville's novel), Wallace's text resituates these strategies within its 'overloaded' future vision of the United States.<sup>56</sup> If Wallace's novel gestures towards the tradition of the 'Great American Novel'—attempting, as Max argues, to 'capture the *everything* of America'—it equally works to disrupt this tradition, evoking an America which has itself become unmanageable, an 'everything' which, in its vastness, cannot be 'mastered' within a literary text.<sup>57</sup>

With this, *Jest* can thus be seen to destabilise the notion of the 'encyclopaedic' altogether. In its recurring instances of chaotic excess, of uncontrollable textual 'overload', Wallace's novel denies the possibility of the kind of summative, coherent literary totality imagined by Mendelson: far from reflecting or attending to 'the whole social and linguistic range of his nation', Wallace leads us to conclude that this kind of encyclopaedic comprehensiveness has become (and has, perhaps, always been) impossible. Burn argues that *Jest* 'dramatizes the limitations' inherent in any attempt towards 'encyclopedic knowledge': while depicting and formally reflecting 'the accumulation of information'—the process of seeking 'exhaustive accounts'—Wallace's novel shows these efforts to be little more than

---

<sup>55</sup> Giles, 'Sentimental Posthumanism', pp. 339–40.

<sup>56</sup> Andrew Hoberek, 'Wallace and American Literature', in *Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, pp. 33–48. In the section of *Jest* in which Hal lists 'following things in the room [that] were blue' (p. 508), for example, Wallace arguably presents us with a parodically emptied-out iteration of the 'roaming and cataloguing' which defined *Moby-Dick*'s 'Cetology' chapters.

<sup>57</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 60.

‘empty and futile exercises’.<sup>58</sup> In this, *Jest*’s excess thus invites us to consider the limitations inherent in Mendelson’s notion of literary ‘completion’, or of any conception of a ‘total’ body of knowledge. In his thesis, Ward articulates how the project of encyclopaedism is by definition ‘inevitably limited’, asserting that ‘encyclopaedic thought is always selective thought—capacious thought, certainly, but by no means all-inclusive or universal or absolute’.<sup>59</sup> For Ward, the encyclopaedia’s totality is ‘always already encoded with a particular set of values’: following this, notions of encyclopaedic fiction such as Mendelson’s are thus seen to be ‘rather too ready to allow “encyclopaedism” to become a euphemism for a nation’s “great novel”, or for a re-packaged “great man” theory of literature’.<sup>60</sup> While confronting these problematically limited conceptions of the ‘great novel’, *Jest* also points us towards a potential alternative, presenting an encyclopaedism which is self-consciously ‘failed’, a textual expansiveness which, in its chaotic excess, is unavoidably incomplete. For Ward, it is this capacity for incompleteness—for an attentiveness to ‘the willed gaps and exclusions on which certain encyclopaedic ideas of the world depend’—which forms the foundation of his own, broader conception of fictional encyclopaedism: he argues that

if encyclopaedic thought requires a totality that is complete, consistent, coherent, singular, and certain, then perhaps what a literary totality enables is a form of encyclopaedism that can involve its own failure—its own incompleteness, inconsistency, incoherence, multiplicity, and uncertainty.<sup>61</sup>

Far from the coherent totality imagined by Mendelson, it is this uncertain, incoherent, incomplete version of the encyclopaedic which we find underpinning the self-evident massiveness of *Jest*. I would argue that Wallace’s novel—in its simultaneous invocation and critique of a series of models for a totalising literary ‘greatness’—finally stands as something of an *anti*-encyclopaedic text, a work which, in its radical, overloaded broken-ness, interrogates the necessary limits both of encyclopaedic thought, and specifically of the more coherently maximalist works of his literary predecessors.

---

<sup>58</sup> Burn, *Reader’s Guide*, p. 28.

<sup>59</sup> Ward, p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> Ward, p. 21. See also Hayes-Brady, who likewise acknowledges the extent to which encyclopaedic novels ‘set themselves up for inevitable failure’: an encyclopaedia, she argues, is ‘necessarily always incomplete’. Building on a reading of Mendelson, Hayes-Brady argues that the encyclopaedic scope of Wallace’s texts ‘invokes a structure of incompleteness, playing with and investigating the possibility of complete articulation’ (*Unspeakable Failures*, pp. 39–40).

<sup>61</sup> Ward, p. 13. Ward’s study takes Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, and Bolaño’s *2666* as its central examples, establishing a tradition of encyclopaedism notably more inclusive than Mendelson’s canon of exclusively white, male, European/American writers.

In attempting to define this anti-encyclopaedic excess, it is perhaps useful to compare *Jest* with another famously expansive US novel of the late 1990s: Don DeLillo's *Underworld*. DeLillo—the writer around whom LeClair first develops his conception of the 'systems novel'—serves as a key point of influence across all of Wallace's fiction, and his work is invoked at various points throughout *Jest*: from the glancing allusion to *Ratner's Star* in the filmography's brief mention of the fictional 'M.I.T. language riots' (p. 987, n. 24);<sup>62</sup> to the echoes of *Great Jones Street* in *Jest*'s descriptions of variously damaged, deformed, or 'gargantuan' (p. 211) infant bodies (recalling DeLillo's description of Mrs Mickewhite's severely disfigured son, 'full of bulges and incurvatures, scant of hair, a soft curious object that seemed to belong in a greenish jar');<sup>63</sup> to the Eschaton passage's extended homage to the war game played between Gary Harkness and Major Staley at the end of DeLillo's *End Zone* (an allusion so direct that Wallace wrote to DeLillo apologising for the 'rather uncomfortable debt' he owed to the novel).<sup>64</sup> While *Underworld*—first published in 1997, a year after *Jest*—is obviously not explicitly referred to within Wallace's novel, it nonetheless provides, as a contemporary maximalist text of comparable length, a pertinent point of comparison for *Jest*'s particular strategies of textual excess.<sup>65</sup> Like *Jest*, *Underworld* is self-consciously engaged in both the exploration and the representation of excess information, as seen, for example' in Klara Sax's observation on the rarity of being able to 'see what stands before you [. . .] in the grinding life of the city':

[. . .] what a novelty of basic sensation [. . .] to look across a measure space and be undistracted by signs and streetlights and taxis and scaffolding, by your own bespattered mind, sorting the data, and by the energy hurrying people make, lunch crowds and buses and bike messengers, all that consciousness powering down the flumes of Manhattan so that it becomes impossible to see across a street to the turquoise tiles of some terra-cotta facade, a winged beast carved above the lintel.<sup>66</sup>

DeLillo, like Wallace, is concerned with 'sorting the data', depicting and interrogating a contemporary US culture characterised by the 'sand-grain manyness of things that can't be

<sup>62</sup> The same fictional riots are also mentioned in DeLillo's novel (DeLillo, *Ratner's Star* (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 31).

<sup>63</sup> DeLillo, *Great Jones Street*, p. 155.

<sup>64</sup> DeLillo, *End Zone* (New York: Penguin, 1972); Wallace, 'Letter to DeLillo, 11<sup>th</sup> June 1992', DeLillo Papers, Harry Ransom Center, Box 101.10. The literary relationship between DeLillo and Wallace has been discussed further by Burn (*Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*, pp. 69–70) and Foster.

<sup>65</sup> *Underworld* is also notable for featuring another fictional film which shares the title of its containing novel: in this case a 'legendary lost film of Sergei Eisenstein, called *Unterwelt*' (DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998), p. 424).

<sup>66</sup> DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 379.

counted', an excess which has profoundly affected the way Americans respond to the world around them.<sup>67</sup>

Where *Underworld* essentially diverges from *Jest*, however, is in the way this excess is reflected in DeLillo's own writing. While undeniably massive in both size and scope, *Underworld* is nonetheless characterised by a formal and linguistic precision, a meticulousness which stands in stark contrast with *Jest*'s unmanageable surpluses of text and data. This difference is partially evident on a sentence-by-sentence basis: in a letter written to DeLillo following his reading of a pre-publication typescript of *Underworld*, Wallace praised the work as 'a book in which absolutely nothing is skimmed or shirked or tossed off or played for the easy laugh', noting how DeLillo's prose 'always seems exquisitely controlled, sober, *poised* rather than *lunging*'.<sup>68</sup> DeLillo's reply is enlightening in its articulation of the guiding impulse underpinning these qualities in his writing:

[. . .] I think the key to all this is precision. If the language is precise, the sentence will not (in theory) seem self-conscious of overworked. At some point (in my writing life) I realized that precision can be a kind of poetry, and the more precise you try to be, or I try to be, the more simply and correctly responsive to what the world looks like – then the better my chances of creating a deeper and more beautiful language.<sup>69</sup>

This aspect of 'precision' lies at the heart of an essential distinction between *Underworld* and *Infinite Jest*: where DeLillo's novel strives to be precise in the construction of its fictional world, *Jest* conversely embodies a self-conscious *imprecision*, an enacted failure to achieve the 'deeper and more beautiful language' which Wallace finds so praiseworthy in DeLillo's work.

This 'precision' is further evident at the level of *Underworld*'s wider form. Even in its engagement with and representation of excess, DeLillo's novel is coherent in tracing a 'secret history' of the US in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its numbered sections moving backwards in time from 1992 to 1952. Shaped by this underlying structure, the maximalism of DeLillo's novel thus brings us much closer to Mendelson's conception of 'encyclopedic narrative', its expansiveness employed in a panoramic representation of contemporary American experience. Boxall has suggested that DeLillo 'uses words to make a world, to build an American edifice':

His is a writing that does not reject, delete, eliminate but one that absorbs,

---

<sup>67</sup> DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 60.

<sup>68</sup> Wallace, 'Letter to DeLillo, 19<sup>th</sup> January 1997', DeLillo Papers, Box 101.10.

<sup>69</sup> DeLillo, 'Letter to David Foster Wallace, 5<sup>th</sup> February 1997', DeLillo Papers, Box 101.10.

recycles, accommodates. [. . .] it does not tend toward silence but toward speech; rather than failure of expression, this work tends toward a sublime articulation.<sup>70</sup>

In contrast to *Underworld*'s 'sublime articulation', *Jest*'s excess is characterised as a form of inarticulation, an incomplete version of literary 'communication'. In these terms, Wallace's writing once again seems to gesture back beyond DeLillo, aligning itself rather with Beckett's earlier efforts at making art out of incompleteness and failure. As in 'Westward', *Jest*'s excesses, in their often incoherent unfinished-ness, reach a point comparable to the speechlessness of Beckett's writing: for Wallace, surplus language serves only to further the incompleteness at the centre of his work.<sup>71</sup>

### 'Something broken'

Looking beyond *Jest*'s specific invocations/critiques of these models of literary encyclopaedism, we find this suggestion of 'non-mastery', of a tension between textual excess and inevitable incompleteness, informing the structure of Wallace's novel as a whole. In comparison with *Underworld*'s comparatively coherent reverse-historical narrative, *Jest* is, at least on the surface, self-consciously chaotic in its arrangement, a collection of fragmentary parts frequently marked by jarring shifts of perspective, location, and time. Cioffi has suggested that the novel could reasonably be approached as 'a collection of numerous short stories all linked by taking place in a relatively circumscribed fictive world'.<sup>72</sup> In this aspect of ostensible structural disorganisation, *Jest* can to a certain extent be seen to live up to Kakutani's dismissive characterisation of the novel as a 'mess', of a 'random muchness of detail and incident'.<sup>73</sup> While Kakutani's reading is undoubtedly reductive—Burn has argued against her characterisation of the novel as 'the bloated product of an undisciplined writer who didn't know when to stop'—it is clear that Wallace *does*, at least to some degree, invite reading of *Jest*'s structure in terms of a failure of coherence and concision, a macro version of the micro instances of textual excess found throughout the novel.<sup>74</sup> Writing to Pietsch during the novel's composition, Wallace

<sup>70</sup> Boxall, 'DeLillo and Media Culture', p. 43.

<sup>71</sup> Michael North has noted this connection between *Jest*'s excess and Beckett's silence. North—who finds a potential model for Incandenza's lethal 'Entertainment' in Beckett's *Film* (1965)—asserts that 'Beckett's minimalism and Wallace's maximalism seem equal if opposite exaggerations that lead to the same end: the image of a human being reduced to pure, fixated watching' ('A More than Infinite Jest', in *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 163–83 (pp. 163–164).

<sup>72</sup> Cioffi, p. 169.

<sup>73</sup> Kakutani, review of *Infinite Jest*, para. 14.

<sup>74</sup> Burn, *Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*, p. 21.

described *Jest* as ‘a novel made up out of shards, almost as if the story were something broken that someone is picking up the pieces of’.<sup>75</sup> We can see, then, how *Jest*’s surface disorganisation invites interpretation in terms of this formal ‘broken-ness’, of this conception of the text as an arrangement of disorganised fragments which it is the job of the reader to (re)construct.

This is not, however, to suggest that the structure of *Jest* is actually ‘random’ or ‘arbitrary’. Critics have convincingly traced the complex patterns and structures at work within the novel: Burn, for example, has argued that *Jest*’s architecture is ‘surprisingly controlled’, asserting that its ‘harmonic structure’ is ‘the product of a layered aesthetic that reaches toward a richer, more polyphonic register than many earlier readings have recognized’.<sup>76</sup> Of these proposed formal models for *Jest*, one of the most critically enduring has been that of the Sierpinski Gasket, a triangular ‘fractal object’ which Carlisle has described as a structure ‘generated geometrically by an iterative process of cutting smaller triangle-sized holes out of larger triangles’.<sup>77</sup> This fractal understanding of *Jest*’s form has its roots in comments made by Wallace himself: in a 1996 radio interview, Wallace acknowledged that *Jest* is ‘actually structured like something called a Sierpinski Gasket, which is a very primitive kind of pyramidal fractal’, describing this as one of the ways the novel is ‘supposed to come together’.<sup>78</sup> In light of these comments, critics have made use of the model of the Sierpinski Gasket in attempting to make sense of the *Jest*’s chaotic organisation: Carlisle’s detailed guide to the novel, for example, is organised so as to map the novel’s various plots, characters, and thematic concerns on to this guiding structure,<sup>79</sup> while Hering has since described how the experience of reading *Jest* is informed by this kind of mathematical construction:

The reader gradually becomes aware of an increase in the size and focus of the chapters as they read, and the initial smaller chapters—relatable to the smaller triangles of the gasket shape—are later retrospectively understood to form part of the overarching structure so we are ultimately aware of the gargantuan

<sup>75</sup> Wallace, letter to Pietsch, qtd. in Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 182.

<sup>76</sup> Burn, *Reader’s Guide*, pp. 36, 40, 21. Burn suggests that the novel’s 90 sections mirror the final 90 days of James Incandenza’s life, in which the ‘Infinite Jest’ film was directed: he posits that ‘the structure of the novel, far from being random, seems to be subtly arranged to parallel the composition of the film that it is about’ (p. 36). In identifying these numerological patterns beneath the surface disorder of *Jest*, Burn situates the novel’s formal strategies in the context of other massive postmodern texts such as *Gravity’s Rainbow* (p. 37).

<sup>77</sup> Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity*, Location 162.

<sup>78</sup> Wallace, ‘Interview with Michael Silverblatt’, *Bookworm* (California: KCRW, 1996)

<<https://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/david-foster-wallace-infinite-jest>> [accessed 27 July 2019].

<sup>79</sup> Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity*, Location 166.



system of relationships that operates across the entire novel.<sup>80</sup>

For critics such as Burn, Hering, and Carlisle, the ostensible disorder of *Jest* is seen to obscure a deeper formal sophistication, a complex order which runs beneath, and gives coherent shape to, the novel's apparent excesses of text and information.

Even as it offers evidence of this underlying formal organisation, however, *Jest* never allows us to wholly abandon our awareness of an essential *disorganisation*, a mass of text which resists our readerly attempts to provide it with shape or meaning. Wallace establishes a conflict between the concurrent suggestions of order and disorder, coherence and incoherence, structure and chaos, within his expansive text. While the novel is clearly not 'random', its gestures towards underlying structure are nonetheless bound up with a kind of failure, a 'broken-ness' which informs even its most complex and considered formal patterns. At the heart of this failure, I would suggest, is a pervasive aspect of structural unfinished-ness. Returning to Wallace's description of the Sierpinski Gasket, we can see how Wallace's invocation of this structure is qualified by an acknowledgment of its incompleteness:

[. . .] although what was structured as a Sierpinski Gasket was the first— was the draft that I delivered to Michael in '94, and it went through some I think 'mercy cuts', so it's probably kind of a lopsided Sierpinski Gasket now.<sup>81</sup>

For Wallace, the novel's adherence to this fractal structure is 'lopsided': in the process of being edited, the text has been left in a state of incompleteness. To a certain degree, Wallace's comments reflect an actual compositional anxiety over *Jest*'s protracted editing process: Max describes how, following several successive rounds of suggested cuts from Pietsch, Wallace was faced with a fear that 'in the cascade of edits, the nebulous, fine-veined schema of the novel had been compromised'.<sup>82</sup> Wallace's letters of the period support this sense of authorial unease: he relates to DeLillo, for example, the frustration of having 'cut 310 pages from the fucker over the winter (it is, still, pretty long), and now even as it's at the copyeditor they say they'd like another 100 or so pages cut',<sup>83</sup> and elsewhere shares with David Markson his worry that 'though many of the cuts (editor-inspired) made the thing better, it fucked up a certain water-tightness that the mastodon-sized first version had, I think'.<sup>84</sup> In these letters, we see Wallace concerned

<sup>80</sup> David Hering, 'Triangles, Cycles, Choices and Chases', in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, pp. 89–100 (p. 90).

<sup>81</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with Silverblatt'.

<sup>82</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 212.

<sup>83</sup> Wallace, 'Letter to Don DeLillo, circa May 1995', DeLillo Papers, Box 101.10.

<sup>84</sup> Wallace, letter to Markson, qtd. in Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 212.

that the process of editing his novel has indeed left it ‘lopsided’, lacking the completeness or coherence of his initial draft.

Beyond this authorial anxiety, however, Wallace’s comments on the post-editorial ‘broken-ness’ of *Jest*’s structure can be read as part of a wider extratextual attempt on Wallace’s part to publicly emphasise the incompleteness at the heart of his novel, to publicly frame the published text as a construction which has—in the process of editing—been left unfinished in some essential way. This sense of Wallace drawing deliberate and self-conscious attention to this incompleteness is supported by other interviews of the period, in which he discusses—and, significantly, exaggerates—the amount of material cut from the first draft of *Jest*. In an interview with Laura Miller, for example, Wallace describes how the novel’s manuscript was ‘1700 manuscript pages, of which close to 500 were cut. So this editor didn’t just buy the book and shepherd it. He line-edited it twice’.<sup>85</sup> Elsewhere, in his interview with Lipsky, Wallace notes how ‘the changes are from Michael’s cuts, I had to move things around. It’s quite a bit shorter than it was’, claiming that the first draft was ‘about five hundred pages longer. Of which four hundred unambiguously needed to go, and the other hundred was painful’.<sup>86</sup> In these comments, Wallace acknowledges the importance of *Jest*’s editing process, recognising the amount of material which ‘needed to go’ from his initial drafts. Crucially, however, he consistently overstates both the length of these draft versions and the amount he cut from them. Steven Moore’s detailed discussion of his reading of a first draft of *Jest*, for example, contradicts Wallace’s account of this massive reduction in size: Moore describes various significant revisions between the first and published drafts, but summarises that ‘it should be obvious [. . .] that not only did Wallace make very few cuts—about 40 pages, and almost none of the ones I suggested, as it happens—he wound up adding a considerable amount of new material’.<sup>87</sup> In drawing public attention to the (largely non-existent) ‘missing pages’ of *Jest*, Wallace can be seen to exaggerate and mythologise the essential incompleteness of his novel, to establish an extratextual framing of the published work as a flawed, compromised, or ‘broken’ version of an imagined ‘complete’ text. In this way, Wallace’s suggestion of the complex

<sup>85</sup> Wallace, ‘Interview with Miller’, p. 64.

<sup>86</sup> Wallace, qtd. in Lipsky, p. 78.

<sup>87</sup> Steven Moore, ‘The First Draft of *Infinite Jest*’, *The Howling Fantods*, 2003, n.p., <[http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/ij\\_first.htm](http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/ij_first.htm)> [accessed 25 July 2019]. Moore estimates that ‘Wallace added at least 200 pages of material, plus expanded many of the previously written episodes’, and admits to being ‘puzzle[d]’ by the claims that ‘the publisher cut 300–400 pages’ from the novel.

structures on which the novel is founded are essentially limited by this aspect of incompleteness: *Jest* may not be random or arbitrary in its excess, but it is nonetheless defined by an essential ‘broken-ness’, one manifested in the reflexive incompleteness which fundamentally informs the structure of the text.

Indeed, we find this aspect of formal incompleteness reflexively modelled within the novel itself. In the extended endnote dedicated to Incandenza’s filmography, we are faced with a discrete instance of a structure which, in both its excessive length—including, beyond its nine-page list of films, production information, and brief descriptions, a further six supplementary sub-footnotes—and its attempts to provide a coherent, total catalogue of Incandenza’s directorial career, seems to reflect on the expansive, ‘encyclopaedic’ strategies of *Jest* as a whole. Hering has explored in detail how the series of ‘nested narratives’ offered by the filmography work as a reflexive ‘interrogation of Wallace’s own methodology’.<sup>88</sup> Like *Jest*, however, the filmography is a self-evidently broken encyclopaedia, one marked by a series of gaps, flaws, and failures which disrupt and problematise its totalising project: from the initial acknowledgments of unknown dates (*‘Cage’* is ‘Dated only “Before Subsidization”’ (p. 986)), and ‘Uncredited’ casts (p. 986, n. 24); to the later accounts of ‘conceptually unfilmable’ works (p. 989, n. 24); to the increasingly frequent expressions of doubt over basic factual details (as evidenced in the gradual accumulation of ‘(?)’ marks across the entries); to the total informational blanks presented by films described only as *‘Untitled. Unfinished. UNRELEASED’* (p. 990, n. 24). In an initial headnote, the filmography’s compilers ‘Comstock, Posner, and Duquette’ (from whose academic article on ‘Exemplary Works of the Anticonfluent *Après-Garde*’ the list is ostensibly drawn) explicitly acknowledge that the filmography is only ‘as complete as we were able to make it’: citing a series of obfuscating factors, they conclude with the admission that ‘the list’s order and completeness are, at this point in time, not definitive’ (p. 985, n. 24). In many respects, it is this filmography, rather than the ‘Infinite Jest’ film, which stands as the most pertinent in-text reflection of Wallace’s own novel: in its gestures towards an expansive, information totality, and its foundational aspects of

---

<sup>88</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 103–4. See also Burn, who reads the films as evidence of ‘an encyclopedic survey of efforts to understand the self’ (*Reader’s Guide*, p. 48); and Iannis Goerlandt, who addresses how the films work to ‘involve the audience with respect to irony’ Iannis Goerlandt, “‘Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away’: Irony and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 47.3 (2006), 309–28 (p. 314).

unfinished-ness, the filmography presents us with a self-contained image of the ‘text’-within-the-text, inviting us as readers to consider the corresponding structural brokenness of its surrounding work.

This formal unfinished-ness is felt most acutely, however, at the novel’s end. *Jest*’s ending is unambiguous in its rejection of coherent or conventional narrative resolution: its final pages (in which Don Gately—convalescing in a hospital bed after a gunshot wound, and attempting to recover without the aid of narcotic painkillers—recalls the horrific death of his former partner Gene Fackelman), fail to ‘close the loop’ with the chronological end-point offered by the novel’s first chapter (Hal’s University of Arizona interview, which takes place roughly a year after the rest of the novel’s action). Readers are faced with a distinct—and potentially jarring—narrative gap between the final chapter and the opening one, a chunk of plot left undescribed, existing beyond the limits of the text. The effect of this narrative ‘breach’ is one of denied conclusion or closure: Samuel Cohen has argued that

at the end of *Infinite Jest*, the thing that readers in general and readers of this very long novel in particular wait for—the final revelation of meaning, the simultaneous end of the chain of events that constitute the plot and the moment when we can look back and see that whole chain in light of its end—isn’t there. What’s there instead is a nonending, an inconclusion—a number of possible but unprovable hypotheses, interpretations of what occurs in this gap in the chain between where the novel ends and where the story or stories that constitute it end.<sup>89</sup>

This sense of ‘inconclusion’ serves in part to frustrate readerly expectations: Kakutani, for example, reads *Jest*’s lack of resolution as another example of its failure, complaining that, at the end, the novel’s ‘word machine is simply turned off, leaving the reader [. . .] suspended in midair’.<sup>90</sup> Other critics, meanwhile, have read the novel’s narrative incompleteness as an expression of an essential unknowability: Boswell describes this ‘significant gap’ as ‘a void, into which all the novel’s unanswered questions fall endlessly, like coins down a well with no bottom’.<sup>91</sup> This ‘nonending’ works in part to again place *Jest* within a tradition of postmodern works which have comparably denied the ‘closed system’ of a conventional realist conclusion (consider, for example Oedipa Maas’ unresolved ‘awaiting’ at the close of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*).<sup>92</sup> Various critics have read *Jest*’s ending as comparable in its rejection of the

<sup>89</sup> Samuel Cohen, ‘To Wish to Try to Sing to the Next Generation: *Infinite Jest*’s History’, in *Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, pp. 59–79 (p. 64).

<sup>90</sup> Kakutani, ‘review of *Infinite Jest*’, para. 14.

<sup>91</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 174.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967).

closure (or enclosure) of a clearly-defined ending: Hering, for example, argues that Wallace is concerned with how a 'closed system might be *transfigured* into an open or communicative one', going on to assert that the 'formal structure of *Infinite Jest*, with its absent, "open" climaxes, represents a rejection of solipsistic and claustrophobic closed systems and environments'.<sup>93</sup> This sense of *Jest*'s ending as a gesture of 'opening out' has been explored most fully, however, by Hayes-Brady, who argues that

In the context of generative failure, to reach a conclusion in any narrative is a priori to close off avenues of possible communication by collapsing the distance between subjects; to succeed, then—to write a successful ending, to perform successful connection on the page—is to fail, and vice versa.<sup>94</sup>

Approached in these terms, the deliberate 'failure' of *Jest*'s ending is read as offering a kind of success: the novel is seen to end 'with a sense not of closure, but of inevitable continuation'.<sup>95</sup>

While these predominantly positive readings of *Jest*'s conclusion are persuasive, I would suggest that the lack of resolution found in Wallace's novel presents us with an incompleteness more specific, and more uneasy, than these models of 'opening out' would suggest. Beyond its general resistance to closure, *Jest* can be seen to enact a distinct form of broken completion, a failed attempt to reach a specific narrative point. This suggestion is supported by Wallace himself, who noted in an online webchat that

there is an ending as far as I'm concerned. Certain kind of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an 'end' can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occur[. . .]red to you, then the book's failed you.<sup>96</sup>

In this notion of converging, unfinished, parallel lines, Wallace suggests that, rather than establishing an 'open', 'continued' system, *Jest* works to guide readers towards a defined ending—albeit one situated beyond the limits of the printed text. This suggestion is supported by the details in the novel's opening (chronologically final) chapter which gesture obliquely towards the details of the narrative's 'missing' year: the most notable example being Hal's reminiscence of 'John N. R. Wayne [. . .] standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head' (p. 17), implying both an undescribed meeting between two of the novel's central characters, and some form of resolution of the search for the 'master copy' of the

<sup>93</sup> Hering, 'Form as Strategy', pp. 137, 141.

<sup>94</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, pp. 22, 30.

<sup>95</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, 39.

<sup>96</sup> Wallace, 'Live Online with David Foster Wallace', Online Chatroom Interview, *Word E-Zine*, 17 December 1997 <<http://deadword.com/site1/habit/wallace/dfwtrans.html>>.

‘Infinite Jest’ film. In this suggestion of a specific, but unreachable, endpoint (a suggestion which has led a number of readers to attempt to reconstruct the ‘actual’ events which take place within this narrative gap), *Jest*’s ending ultimately offers neither openness nor undecidability, but rather an enacted incompletion, a self-conscious unfinished-ness which mirrors the mythologised ‘missing pages’ cut from the first draft of Wallace’s novel.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, it could be argued that, through his persistent references to these ‘missing pages’ in letters and interviews, Wallace deliberately framed the novel’s narrative incompletion as a result of this editorial process, establishing the implication that what we are reading is, in fact, the ‘unfinished’ version of the text.

Within criticism of *Jest*, Casey Henry has offered a pertinent exploration of the novel’s incomplete structure. Henry, who traces the recurring figure of circles, loops and ‘annularity’ across Wallace’s text, argues that Wallace’s novel is itself structured as a broken circle, its cyclical structure—which he compares with that of Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*—marked by an ‘epiphanic gap’ between the novel’s end and its beginning.<sup>98</sup> Henry’s positing of this formal model is supported by the presence of an incomplete typographical circle, printed at the bottom corner of the novel’s final page, extending beyond its margin: he argues that

The partially occluded circle, lying just beyond Gately’s final breakdown, is essential to understanding the forward motion and means of breaking the self-enclosed annular rings that we might understand the novel’s arrangement prompts.<sup>99</sup>

While this typographical mark, present in the first edition of *Jest*, has (for unknown reasons) been absent from recent editions of the text, Henry convincingly argues for its importance in Wallace’s design for the novel: he notes, for example, how, in his notes on the typesetting proofs for *Jest*, Wallace is consistently ‘fastidious about this terminating symbol’.<sup>100</sup> In his attachment to this ostensibly superficial marking, Wallace suggests the importance of this ‘broken circle’ figure for understanding *Jest*’s incompletion: the novel traces the outline of a

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Aaron Swartz, ‘What Happens at the End of *Infinite Jest*? (Or, the *Infinite Jest* Ending Explained)’, *Aaron Swartz’s Raw Thought*, 2009 <<http://www.aaronsw.com/weblog/ijend>> [accessed 25 July 2019].

<sup>98</sup> Casey Michael Henry, “‘Sudden Awakening to the Fact That the Mischief Is Irretrievably Done’: Epiphanic Structure in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56.5 (2015), 480–502 (pp. 481–482).

<sup>99</sup> Henry, pp. 482–483. The significance of this ‘little quarter circle’ has been explored elsewhere by Goerlandt, who describes it as a ‘loophole’, allowing readers of *Jest* the opportunity to ‘leap out of the loop’ of the text’s recursive, circular structure (Goerlandt, p. 324).

<sup>100</sup> Henry, p. 482.

fully circular narrative shape, but leaves the completion of the circle outside the frame of his text. This curving line, while clearly defined, remains inescapably unfinished, stubbornly beyond the reader's grasp. In this 'circular' motif, Wallace directs us once again back to the notion of the encyclopaedia—the name of which, as Ward notes, is 'derived from Quintilian's Greek "enkyklios paideia" (ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία), which translates literally as "circle of learning"'.<sup>101</sup> In both the incomplete 'loop' of its narrative and the occluded circle printed on its final page, *Jest* once again positions itself as a self-consciously 'failed' iteration of the encyclopaedia's circular project: Burn suggests that 'completing this circle of learning from the novel still leaves the reader's knowledge incomplete'.<sup>102</sup> Burn goes on to read this incomplete loop as an attempt on Wallace's part to 'break the closed circle and direct the reader outside of the book, to find what has escaped the encyclopaedia'.<sup>103</sup> While I agree that *Jest*'s ending finds an aesthetic potential within this 'broken' structure, I would again argue that Wallace's novel does not establish a straightforwardly 'open system' for our readerly interpretation, but rather establishes an unresolved conflict between completion and incompleteness, open-ness and closed-ness. In this conflict, *Jest* can thus be read as following the model established by the various 'unfinished' endings of Wallace's preceding fictional work: in *Jest*, as in these earlier examples, Wallace both gestures towards the possibility of narrative closure and denies access to this resolution, structuring his texts around an unavoidable and self-conscious 'breach' in the text. To a certain extent *Jest*'s final narrative lacuna can be read as a larger-scale recapitulation of *Broom*'s final, unfinished line, signalling as it does an endpoint which, while clearly defined (like the missing word 'word' in Rick's final sentence), is nonetheless absent from the published work.

It is this figure of incompleteness, of self-conscious unfinished-ness, which underpins the central 'failure' of *Jest*. In its self-consciously 'broken' ending, Wallace's novel delineates and demands—more clearly than in any of his preceding fiction—a particular kind of interpretative activity. Even if *Jest*'s system is not wholly 'open', it nonetheless creates a space for a

---

<sup>101</sup> Ward, p. 9.

<sup>102</sup> Burn explores the novel's 'circle of learning' in relation to the various motifs and versions of circularity found throughout *Jest*—from the (complete) typographical 'loops' which designate new chapters, to the circular routines of drug addiction—tracing Wallace's distrust of the encyclopaedia's 'complete' circle back to William Empson's insistence, in his essay 'Circles', that 'all the argument and wisdom is not in the encyclopaedia' (Empson, qtd. in Burn, *Reader's Guide*, p. 29).

<sup>103</sup> Burn, *Reader's Guide*, p. 29.

necessary readerly ‘work’, the active, admittedly ‘uneasy’ effort of ‘fighting *through*’ the text which he described in his interview with McCaffery. Within the critical reception of *Jest*, a number of commentators have addressed how the novel demands a form of active reading: Staes, for example, argues that the ‘many underspecified actions and textual gaps in *Infinite Jest* indicate that it is up to the reader to reorganize the seemingly unrelated narrative strands into a meaningful whole’,<sup>104</sup> while Holland comparably explores how

the novel’s narrative fragmentation and incompleteness motivate the reader to rearrange and connect pieces, fill in gaps, and follow leaps in time and perspective, causing her to empathize with a variety of characters and with the author who handed us the puzzle to figure out, or perhaps even to create the missing chapter that enables her to escape the recursive loop in which all of its characters are bound.<sup>105</sup>

We can see how the narrative strategies of Wallace’s novel are built on this foundational unfinished-ness: Burn observes that ‘[o]ne root of *infinite*, after all, is the French *in fini*—unfinished or incomplete’ arguing that Wallace’s novel is ‘designed to leave us with our own work still to do’.<sup>106</sup> Significantly, however, I would argue that *Jest*’s incompleteness equally demands that we attend to the *limitations* of this interpretative activity. By directing us towards a defined, inaccessible end-point, Wallace suggests that, rather than an open-ended continued conversation, the ‘work’ of reading *Jest* must itself be incomplete. Like the silence at the end of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, *Jest*’s ending points us towards a textual breach which cannot be ‘filled in’, a blank space which resists our attempts at ‘complete’ interpretation. Far from the ‘complete’, pacifying entertainment offered by Incandenza’s lethal film, Wallace presents us with a ‘failed’ entertainment, a text which, in its manifest broken-ness, invites us to reflexively consider our own, correspondingly broken, participatory work in constructing the narrative. In this, Wallace again brings to mind Barthes’ notion of the ‘writerly’ work: in making us reflexively aware of our own (admittedly qualified) roles in as ‘producer[s] of the text’, Wallace’s novel sets itself apart from the commercial ‘readerly’ pleasures, the ‘kind of idleness’, exemplified in Incandenza’s film.<sup>107</sup> Beyond establishing this readerly/writerly (or art/entertainment) distinction, however, I would suggest that Wallace’s novel gestures towards something more fundamental about the process of reading literature, provoking a more self-

<sup>104</sup> Staes, ‘Wallace and Empathy’, p. 28.

<sup>105</sup> Holland, ‘*Infinite Jest*’, p. 130.

<sup>106</sup> Burn, ‘Theory of Vision’, p. 91. For more on the ‘active reading’ provoked by *Jest*’s narrative incompleteness, see Cioffi, Goerlandt.

<sup>107</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 4.



conscious version of the kind of interpretative work involved in any reading of a fictional text. Ultimately, Wallace is less concerned with establishing a clear line between entertainment and ‘art’, and more with leading us to interrogate the nature of our own readerly work—an interrogation which we will explore further in the next chapter.

#### 4. ‘...’: *Brief Interviews* and *Oblivion: Stories*

##### ‘Radically Condensed’

In the wake of *Infinite Jest*, both *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and *Oblivion: Stories* (2004) mark a significant shift in Wallace’s writing. In stark contrast with the expansiveness and excess of Wallace’s previous novel, these collections are marked everywhere by restriction and limitation, by an abiding sense of constraint which informs the structure, concerns, and mood of the work. In September 1996, Wallace writes to DeLillo, complaining that he has ‘spent all summer doing dozens of obscure ministories that seem neither comprehensible nor interesting to anyone else’.<sup>1</sup> This move towards the miniature, the potentially ‘incomprehensible’, is heralded—and perhaps most starkly illustrated—by the short piece which opens the *Brief Interviews* collection, a text worth quoting in its entirety:

##### A RADICALLY CONDENSED HISTORY OF POSTINDUSTRIAL LIFE

When they were introduced, he made a witticism, hoping to be liked. She laughed extremely hard, hoping to be liked. Then each drove home alone, staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to their faces.

The man who’d introduced them didn’t much like either of them, though he acted as if he did, anxious as he was to preserve good relations at all times. One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one.<sup>2</sup>

In its depiction of characters who, in their self-conscious attempts ‘to be liked’ or ‘to preserve good relations’, are faced with interpersonal disconnection, the story rehearses some of *Jest*’s familiar thematic concerns. Here, however, these ideas have been ‘radically condensed’, almost entirely emptied of content or context. Denied details of character, setting, dialogue, or action, we are faced with what Burn has called a ‘monochrome fiction’, a text ‘so stripped of individuating local details that all the color drains out of it’.<sup>3</sup> In this light, the title’s hyperbolic—and apparently ironic—claim to offer a microcosmic ‘history of postindustrial life’ seems to reflect on this aspect of blank impersonality: as in the unsettling ‘very same twist’ which appears on both ‘his’ and ‘her’ faces, the title assigns a level of generalised *sameness* to late-20<sup>th</sup> century experience, a radical condensation of *Jest*’s chorus of varied and conflicting voices, leaving a story which could seemingly be set anywhere, about anyone. Wallace presents

---

<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, ‘Letter to Don DeLillo, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1996’, DeLillo Papers, Box 101.10.

<sup>2</sup> Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, p. 0. Further references to *Brief Interviews* in this chapter will be placed in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Burn, *Reader’s Guide*, p. 14.

us with a narrative pared down to almost nothing, one which barely qualifies as a ‘story’ at all (in a not-insignificant detail, the text occupies ‘Page 0’ of the book) and which descends into the ominous, empty repetition of the final sentence. While ‘A Radically Condensed History’ cannot quite be treated as representative of the texts in *Brief Interviews* or *Oblivion*—at 79 words, it stands as Wallace’s shortest story—it is nevertheless useful in providing an example of the change evident in his post-*Infinite Jest* writing, the sense of the contracted, the empty, the ‘monochrome’, which pervades these two collections.

How, then, can we make sense of this shift? While the stories in *Brief Interviews* and *Oblivion* might seem to offer an antithesis to the sheer bigness of *Jest*, these short texts are neither characterisable in terms of minimalism, and particularly not within the tradition of American minimalist fiction, with its attendant associations—as outlined by Robert C. Clark—of the ‘efficient, allusive, and implicative’, of ‘simple and direct’ language employed with ‘precision and craftsmanship’.<sup>4</sup> This minimalist aesthetic is neatly articulated in Ernest Hemingway’s ‘iceberg’ model:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.<sup>5</sup>

Hemingway’s conception of a fiction which, in its omission of excess detail, is suggestive of hidden depths—a conception arguably borne out in, for example, the work of Raymond Carver—seems inadequate as an explanation of the kind of smallness employed by Wallace in *Brief Interviews* and *Oblivion*. Rather, these stories are more often marked by incompleteness and inarticulacy, by the kind of ‘hollow places’ which Hemingway critiques in the writer who ‘does not know’ things. Indeed, this notion of ‘hollowness’ is particularly pertinent in exploring the structures of incompletion found across these two collections. Where Wallace’s earlier fiction is most frequently characterised by points of terminal incompleteness—by the concluding ‘gaps’ seen, for example, in *Broom*’s unfinished final sentence, or *Jest*’s ruptured narrative ‘loop’—in *Brief Interviews* and *Oblivion* these lacunae are instead arranged and distributed across the collections’ shorter texts. The result is a series of stories which seem to

<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Clark, *American Literary Minimalism* (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2015), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner, 1932), p. 192.

have been ‘hollowed out’, either emptied of content (as in ‘A Radically Condensed History’), or otherwise marked by frequent and self-conscious points of textual or narrative incompleteness.

Rather than an embrace of minimalist economy and precision, Wallace’s shift towards relative ‘smallness’ in *Brief Interviews* and *Oblivion* might instead be read as moving ever closer to the work of Samuel Beckett, to the principles of ‘[i]mpotence, incompleteness, and failure’ which serve as ‘necessary conditions’ for what Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit have termed Beckett’s ‘art of impoverishment’.<sup>6</sup> The abiding ‘hollowness’ of the two collections recalls Beckett’s own stated ambition to ‘bore one hole after another’ into language, ‘until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through’.<sup>7</sup> Despite this turn towards ‘impoverishment’, however, the stories of *Brief Interviews* and *Oblivion* are not straightforwardly definable in terms of the movement towards ‘pale, starved fizzles of prose’ which, Boxall argues, characterises the progression of Beckett’s late work.<sup>8</sup> Rather, Wallace’s stories are marked by a continued concern with textual excess: from the three-page, 725-word sentence which begins ‘Death is Not the End’, to the extended narratives of *Oblivion* (some of which stretch almost to novella-length), Wallace continues to employ and interrogate the possibility of *too much* language.<sup>9</sup> Even in their apparent movement towards ‘smallness’, these stories present a tension between constraint and excess, between in- and over-articulacy. This tension is captured by Boswell, who comments that, while Wallace’s later fiction remains ‘verbal to a fault—copious, talkative, written and over-written’, its ‘endless outpouring of language’ can nonetheless be seen to serve ‘a curiously negative purpose: it is an attempt to invoke indirectly the very things that it is *not* addressing’.<sup>10</sup> Across *Oblivion* and *Brief Interviews*, these verbal ‘outpourings’ seem more than ever to designate a failure of language, a speech which leads back to the same point as speechlessness. This chapter investigates the nature and significance of the self-conscious ‘hollow places’ found throughout these two collections. To do this, I will focus in turn on a key recurring motif from each book—in *Brief*

<sup>6</sup> Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Beckett, ‘German Letter of 1937’, in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. by Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 172.

<sup>8</sup> Boxall, ‘DeLillo and Media Culture’, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> We have only to consider Arsene’s 26-page, single-paragraph monologue at the end of *Watt*’s first chapter to see how Beckett—and particularly his earlier work—is likewise concerned with the notion of linguistic and textual excess (Beckett, *Watt* (London: Calder Publications, 1963), pp. 37–62).

<sup>10</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 209.

*Interviews*, ‘silence’; in *Oblivion*, the ‘untenanted’—both of which serve as thematic reflections of these textual and narrative gaps, and the differences between which serve to articulate the changes which Wallace’s work undergoes during this period. In this, I will trace the changing ways in which Wallace employs and explores incompleteness in his post-*Infinite Jest* work, articulate a potential connection between the thematic incompleteness of Wallace’s earlier writing and the more radical, inescapable unfinished-ness of *The Pale King*.

### ‘Q.’: Brief Interviews with Hideous Men

Even when considered in the light of the unfinished-ness which we have identified across all of Wallace’s fiction, the stories collected in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* are striking in the extent to which they foreground instances of formal incompleteness. Here, more than anywhere else in Wallace’s writing, narrative incompleteness is figured in terms of visible breaks in the text: gaps, holes, and breaches which interrupt and fragment the process of reading. These structural gaps are evident from the level of the book’s organisation. While the final order of *Brief Interviews*’s stories was suggested by Wallace’s editor Michael Pietsch,<sup>11</sup> the narrative and thematic links established between the various texts seem nevertheless to demand that we approach them in terms of something like a coherent whole: Boswell suggests that the book is ‘carefully constructed so that it works better as a story cycle than a mere collection of short pieces’.<sup>12</sup> Running parallel to this suggestion of ‘careful construction’, however, is a concurrent sense that the coherence of this ‘whole’ has been compromised, that the structure which confronts us is in some way unfinished. While the book’s titular ‘Interviews’, for example, present an apparently connected, numbered series of texts catalogued by date and location, this series is self-consciously incomplete: although the interviews’ numbers reach as high as #72, the collection contains only 18 pieces, presented in apparently random order. In this, Wallace suggests that we have only partial access to a larger, inaccessible whole—that the text in front of us is one marked by significant missing pieces. This notion of the incomplete series recurs throughout *Brief Interviews*, most notably in the group of texts entitled ‘Yet Another Example

---

<sup>11</sup> In an interview with John O’Brien, Wallace commented that ‘The last fiction book [. . .] *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, the order of things that I had sent him [i.e. Michael Pietsch] was utterly different than the order that’s in the book. He made the arrangement that’s in the book and it’s about 450 percent better [. . .]’ (Wallace, ‘Interview with John O’Brien and Richard Powers’ (2000), in *Conversations*, pp. 110–120 (p. 113)).

<sup>12</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 182.

of the Porousness of Certain Borders'. While the collection provides only three 'Examples', the non-sequential numbers attached to each piece (XI, VI, and XXIV, respectively) again suggest a greater number of unheard stories (a suggestion compounded by each title's weary characterisation of each piece as 'Yet Another' example), a further 'whole' which remains beyond our reach. Like the receding 'parallel lines' of *Jest*'s inaccessible ending, Wallace again establishes his text as an unfinished structure: Holland argues that the collection 'withhold[s] overarching closure and coherence by comprising pieces and series of pieces that signify gaps, incompleteness, and disorder as much as meaningful presence'.<sup>13</sup>

Within *Brief Interviews*, these textual gaps are consistently figured in terms of, or otherwise associated with, instances of the unsaid or unsayable. The notion of meaningful silence forms a recurring figure across all of Wallace's work: throughout *Jest*, for example, silence is frequently referred to in weighted, textured terms, from the 'carbonated', 'hostile' silence of Hal's admissions interview, to the 'great balloon of colored silence' occupied by Ken Erdedy, to Hugh Steeply's deliberate employment of 'silent pauses as integral parts of his techniques of interface'.<sup>14</sup> We can trace this concern back to *Broom*, where Wallace makes frequent use of ellipses to designate significant silences within the novel's passages of unattributed dialogue, as in this conversation between Rick Vigorous and Mindy Metalman:

'Just sorry, is all.'  
'...'  
'If such is appropriate.'  
'...'  
'Which I rather think it is.'  
'Ricky, that's silly, don't be sorry. There's no need to be sorry.'  
'...'<sup>15</sup>

These transcribed pauses, which recur across Wallace's fiction, provide silence with a defined shape and form within the text, serving as a concretisation of the weighted, meaningful instances of speechlessness which Wallace articulates and explores through his writing. Hayes-Brady traces this concern with silence back to Beckett, noting the parallels between Wallace's 'recurrent, precise' use of ellipses and Beckett's 'exacting stage directions regarding the length

<sup>13</sup> Mary K. Holland, 'Mediated Immediacy in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*', in *Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, pp. 107–30 (pp. 109–10).

<sup>14</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 8, 27, 108.

<sup>15</sup> Wallace, *Broom*, p. 87. Burn finds a model for these long passages of unattributed speech in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, noting that, where Gaddis makes sparing use of these 'blank line[s] of dialogue', this technique becomes 'much more central' in Wallace's work (*Reader's Guide*, p. 30).

of silences'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it is possible to read Wallace's work as following in the tradition of a twentieth century 'literature of silence', a group of writers (among whom Beckett is most often included) who have been seen to employ silence as a response—perhaps the *only* response—to the condition of modernity: Ihab Hassan, for example, argues that the works of Beckett and Henry Miller embody an 'anti-literature', one which 'turn[s] against itself, aspires to silence, leaving us with uneasy intimations of outrage and apocalypse';<sup>17</sup> George Steiner, meanwhile reads the silences of Kafka and Beckett as reactions to 'a certain exhaustion of verbal resources in modern civilization', to the 'political inhumanity of the twentieth century'.<sup>18</sup> However, looking beyond these suggestions of a modern or postmodern 'exhaustion' of language (suggestions more explicitly taken up in, for example, Barth's conception of a 'literature of exhaustion'), Wallace's work can also be seen to gesture again towards the philosophy found at the conclusion of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein concludes with a famous articulation of the parameters of speech: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'.<sup>19</sup> By establishing this distinction between the speakable and the unspeakable, Wittgenstein invokes a silence which exists beyond the reach of language, a space which is meaningful precisely *because* of its very inexpressibility. In a well-known letter to Ludwig von Ficker, he writes that 'my work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one'.<sup>20</sup> In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein puts forward a philosophy which, in 'clearly displaying the speakable', aspires to 'mean the unspeakable', to show the shape and limits of this inaccessible silence, and thus to make sense of the world as an essentially 'limited whole'.<sup>21</sup> It is perhaps this conception of a negative 'space', a significant silence which remains outside the limits of text or language, which most usefully explains the meaningful silences of Wallace's fiction, and particularly the proliferating points of speechlessness found throughout *Brief Interviews*—a collection in which silence at points threatens to crowd out and overwhelm the text altogether.

---

<sup>16</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 69.

<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein, 'Letters to Ludwig von Ficker', ed. by Allan Janik, trans. by Bruce Gillette, in *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives*, ed. by C. G. Luckhardt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 94–95.

<sup>21</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.115, 6.15.

The central example of this speechlessness is found in the ‘Brief Interviews’ themselves. This sequence of short pieces, which form a structural and thematic backbone to the collection, is presented as a series of unattributed testimonies from an assortment of men united in ‘hideousness’, a toxicity most often manifested in their dysfunctional, manipulative, and/or abusive relationships with women. The interviews are immediately striking in terms of form: each text is laid out as a one-sided conversation between hideous interviewee and an interviewer whose questions have been redacted, replaced only with the letter ‘Q.’.<sup>22</sup> These unheard questions serve as the collection’s clearest link between formal and thematic silence: each ‘Q.’ serves both as a visible structural break and as a meaningful silence, a pointed instance of the unspoken and unspeakable which both interrupts and shapes the ‘hideous’ speaker’s otherwise unbroken monologue. These silences seem only more significant when the series is considered as a (partially) coherent narrative whole: as the interviews accumulate, it becomes clear that they are being conducted by a single female character, a silent ‘voice’ who draws these scattered, fragmentary pieces together. Wallace himself suggested that this figure (whom he refers to as ‘Q’) should be considered the book’s ‘protagonist’, with the interviews constituting a larger narrative, culminating in her experiencing ‘something *really* bad’.<sup>23</sup> While this narrative is only barely gestured at in the text itself—Q’s ‘really bad’ fate, for example, is signalled only by an interviewee’s abrupt, ominous exclamation (‘oh no not again behind you *look out!*’ (BI, p. 192)) at the close of the chronologically final interview—these weighted silences, these spaces at the edges of and within these stories, nonetheless create the suggestion of an unspoken, inaccessible story, a coherence beyond the confines of the printed work.

Looking closely at the ‘spaces’ in the ‘Brief Interviews’, we can see the complex and varied ways in which these silences are arranged and patterned. At the centre of this are the interviewer’s redacted questions, the ‘Q.’s which come to assume a range of shapes and significances, working to inform our readerly responses to the texts. Frequently, these silences seem designed to implicate the interviewee in their ‘hideous’ treatment of women—or, rather to allow space for the speaker to implicate themselves. This can be seen in ‘B.I #36’, a short,

---

<sup>22</sup> This one-sided interview format was first employed by Wallace in the discussions between Orin Incandenza and ‘Helen’ Steeply in *Jest*: in an interview with Lorin Stein, Wallace admitted that this technique was something he felt he had ‘attempted but never mastered’ in his earlier novel (Wallace, ‘Interview with Lorin Stein’ (1999), in *Conversations*, pp. 89–93 (p. 90)).

<sup>23</sup> Wallace, ‘Interview with Stein’, in *Conversations*, p. 90.



unsettling piece set in a 'Metropolitan Domestic Violence Community Outreach, Counseling, and Services Center':

'So I decided to get help. I got in touch with the fact that the real problem had nothing to do with her. I saw that she would forever go on playing victim to my villain. I was powerless to change her. She was not part of the problem I could, you know, address. So I made a decision. To get help for *me*. I now know it was the best thing I've ever done, and the hardest. It hasn't been easy, but my self-esteem is much higher now. I've halted the shame spiral. I've learned forgiveness. I *like* myself.'

Q.

'Who?' (*BI*, p. 28)

Here, the interviewer's silent question punctures the interviewee's narcissistic account of his own self-improvement, offering a stark reminder of the partner (and, presumably, victim of domestic violence) who—amid the speaker's self-aggrandising language of 'halting the shame spiral' and 'learning forgiveness'—has been erased from the narrative entirely, an act of silencing which mirrors the disappearance of Q herself. This sense of the interviews' gaps and silences working to expose the essential 'hideousness' of the interviewees recurs throughout the sequence, as in this passage from 'B.I. #15':

'It is a proclivity, and provided there's minimal coercion and no real harm it's essentially benign, you'll have to agree. And that there are a surprisingly small number who require any coercion at all, be apprised'

Q.

'From a psychological standpoint the origins appear obvious. Various therapists concur, I might add, here and elsewhere. So it's all quite tidy.' [. . .]

Q.

'I mean, it's not as if I'm torturing them or burning them.' (*BI*, p. 15)

Again, the interviewee's 'tidy' rationalisation of his ostensibly 'benign' behaviour—a behaviour which, crucially, goes undescribed—is disrupted and fragmented by these textual breaches, breaches which eventually prompt him into an unsettling defence of his actions in terms of that which he is *not* doing. While the content of the interviewer's questions remains inaccessible to us, these points of speechlessness—here and throughout the sequence—nonetheless work to incriminate the speakers in their hideousness, gesturing towards the disturbing implications of that which is left unsaid, and rupturing the smooth surfaces of the interviewees' monologic self-presentation.

Beyond these examples of implication and incrimination, the function of these silent questions varies and shifts throughout the sequence. At times, the spaces are used for darkly comic effect: in 'B.I. #48', for example the speaker's extended description of his own unorthodox sexual behaviour is interrupted by a 'Q.' which shifts the conversation abruptly

towards his mother, whom he describes (a little too breezily) as ‘Alive and kicking. [. . .] liv[ing] with my sister and her husband and their two small children. Very much alive’ (*BI* p. 87). At other points, meanwhile, the ‘Q.’ is joined by the ellipses familiar from Wallace’s earlier work, suggesting an actual (usually awkward or uncomfortable) break in the dialogue, as in ‘B.I. #14’:

‘It wouldn’t be so embarrassing if it wasn’t so totally fucking weird. If I had any clue what it was about. You know?’

Q. . . .

‘God, now I’m embarrassed as hell.’ (*BI*, p. 15)

While these silences serve various purposes, they are consistent in self-consciously guiding our reading, informing and directing our responses to, and interpretation of, the texts. When considering the ‘Brief Interviews’ as a whole—and particularly the implied ‘narrative’ running between the pieces—we can see how the sequence is organised around, and thus shaped by, these points of speechlessness. In attempting to piece together (as far as possible) the story of the absent interviewer Q, the reader is forced at every turn to pay attention, not only to the limited information they *are* given (eg. dates, numbers, and locations), but also to the shape and significance of that which is unsaid. Across the pieces, these silent spaces are variously used to suggest the format of each interview (which shifts variously between clinical exercise, informal discussion, ‘overheard’ conversation, and personal argument), the relationship between interviewer and interviewee (which ranges from professional distance to apparent romantic engagement), and even the parameters of, and intentions behind, the overall ‘project’ (the origins of the interviewer’s focus on ‘hideous’ maleness would, presumably, be more clearly established in ‘B.I. #1’, an interview which is pointedly absent). By organising the text around—and, in a sense, positioning an implied central narrative within—these ‘hollow’ spaces, the ‘Brief Interviews’ seem built on a foundation of meaningful silence, of an inaccessible absence which at times seems to hold more weight and significance than the words on the page.

How, then, can we interpret these these self-conscious points of textual silence? Within criticism of Wallace’s work, the sequence has most frequently (and most productively) been approached in terms of questions of gender and structures of power: Hayes-Brady, for example, characterises the interviews as a series of ‘linguistic power struggles mediated through gender

exchange',<sup>24</sup> while Holland suggests that they offer a 'gender-specific manifestation of the narcissism that Wallace has explored in fiction and nonfiction', a collection of men who appropriate women in their 'solipsistically conceived quests to escape despair'.<sup>25</sup> We can see how the silent interviewer Q comes to stand as a figure of 'marginalized feminine subjectivity' within the texts: throughout the sequence, her questions seem to have been silenced or erased by the oppressive chorus of hideous male interviewees who serve as her subjects.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, this 'silencing' reads as a problematic strategy on Wallace's part: by denying Q a voice of her own, Wallace seems, whether purposefully or otherwise, to have engaged in a denial of feminine agency which uncomfortably mirrors the 'hideous' actions, the misogynistic and narcissistic behaviour, of the men depicted within the stories. For Hayes-Brady, however, Q's silence can equally be interpreted as a 'mode of resistance': she argues that, from her position of silence, Q stands as 'the most powerful voice in the collection, shaping and framing the confused outpourings of her subjects'.<sup>27</sup> We have already discussed how the interviewer's silent questions are organised so as to implicate and incriminate the hideous interviewees; Hayes-Brady reads Q—in her employment of weighted, powerful silence—as a 'latter-day Philomela figure', a character who, having herself been violently silenced, weaves this silence into a 'tapestry of accusation' in the form of the interviews.<sup>28</sup> Whether or not we agree unreservedly with Hayes-Brady's (potentially generous) treatment of gender politics in Wallace's writing—Holland, for example, offers a far more critical interpretation of Wallace's depictions of 'empty men and appropriated or abused women'—her reading is astute in articulating the power held by the textual gaps of the 'Interviews', the extent to which Q.'s silences work to shape the text surrounding them.<sup>29</sup>

Considering the 'Interviews' in more specifically formal terms, meanwhile, we can see

<sup>24</sup> Hayes-Brady, "' . . .': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace', in *Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, pp. 131–150 (p. 143).

<sup>25</sup> Holland, 'Mediated Immediacy', p. 108.

<sup>26</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 177.

<sup>27</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 177. In this, Q. follows in a line of significantly inaccessible, peripheral, silent female characters in Wallace's fiction—running from 'Gramma' Beadsman in *Broom* to Avril Incandenza in *Jest*—characters who, even in their (sometimes problematic) absence, can be seen to exert an inescapable influence on their surrounding characters, narratives, and texts.

<sup>28</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, 177. This 'tapestry of accusation' can arguably be seen to target Wallace own 'hideous maleness', to serve as a reflexive critique of the inescapably limited depictions of women in Wallace's work—depictions which Hayes-Brady has acknowledged as 'patchy at best and enormously problematic at worst' (*Unspeakable Failures*, 167).

<sup>29</sup> Holland, 'By Hirsute Author', p. 65.

how these arrangements of incompleteness, this structural ‘hollowing out’ of the text, might be seen to invoke a tradition of more radically experimental fictional work. In particular, the sense of formal *constraint* which runs through the sequence—the aspect of limitation imposed by the ‘one-sided interview’ format—seems reminiscent of the ‘constrained writing’ employed by the OuLiPo (the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, or ‘Workshop of Potential Literature’), a Paris-based group of French experimental writers—including Raymond Queneau, François Le Lionnais, and Georges Perec—who, since 1960, have ‘defined and elaborated the practice of writing under constraint’.<sup>30</sup> Oulipian writing is characterised by its incorporation of formal and structural constraints, of supplementary rules and systems which work to place a limit on, and thus reshape, the process of writing literary texts. These constraints vary from the explicitly disruptive and experimental—Jean Lescure’s ‘S+7’ formula, for example, involves taking an existing literary work and replacing each noun (or ‘substantive’) with the seventh following noun from a chosen dictionary—to more subtle, seamless forms of limitation—such as those found in Perec’s *La Disparition* (1969), a novel written entirely without use of the letter ‘e’. While, as Jan Baetens has noted, these kinds of supplementary limitation could be considered a ‘universal phenomenon’ in literature, part and parcel with ‘the notion of form itself’—we find aspects of constraint at work in such familiar poetic forms as the sonnet, for example—the writers of the OuLiPo collective can nonetheless stake a claim to have drawn this notion of ‘writing under constraint’ into more radical and self-conscious territory, to have played a key role in both ‘the rediscovery of constrained writing’ and in ‘the dramatic redefinition of its stakes’.<sup>31</sup> We can see how the self-consciously incomplete conversations of Wallace’s ‘Interviews’ can be read as offering an almost Oulipian textual constraint; in his systematic hollowing-out of the text, Wallace seems to invoke specifically the presence of these earlier literary experiments.<sup>32</sup> Where Wallace essentially differs from these literary predecessors, however, is in the end to which these constraints are employed. Where Oulipian texts place focus on *process*, on how the act of *writing* fiction is affected and informed by these

---

<sup>30</sup> Jan Baetens, ‘OuLiPo and Proceduralism’, in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. by Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 115–127 (p. 127).

<sup>31</sup> Baetens, pp. 116–17.

<sup>32</sup> Burn has discussed the influence of the OuLiPo on Wallace’s work, noting an apparent reference to one of the group’s most famous members in *Jest* (the mysterious Québécois terrorist ‘Luria Perec’, presumably named after Georges Perec), and identifying traces of Oulipian ‘formal games’ in the constrained structure of ‘A Radically Condensed History’ (Burn, *Reader’s Guide*, pp. 17–18).

supplementary formal ‘rules’, Wallace is more consistently focused on interrogating the nature and process of *reading* fictional texts. Rather than serving as a self-imposed game or experiment, a demonstration of Wallace’s own writerly negotiation with formal constraint, the silent questions of the ‘Brief Interviews’ rather direct these aspects of constraint towards us as readers, presenting us with fundamentally limited, self-evidently incomplete text. In reading the interviews, we are led to participate in a kind of ‘reading under constraint’, a reading in which we must everywhere negotiate—and with this, reflexively consider—the inevitable inadequacy of our engagement with the text at hand.

Beyond gesturing at their own specific unfinished-ness, the instances of self-conscious silence found through the ‘Brief Interviews’ might be seen to invite a wider consideration of the constraints involved in any readerly engagement with literary texts, of the ‘spaces’ which perhaps confront us in any work of fiction. In his phenomenology of the reading process, Iser puts forward a model of reading founded on the notion of ‘gaps in the text’, of ‘elements of indeterminacy’ which the reader is left to fill with their own (inevitably limited and subjective) interpretation.<sup>33</sup> For Iser, these gaps function as the ‘pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves’: it is through these blank spaces that the reader is induced to ‘participate in both the production and the comprehension’ of the literary work.<sup>34</sup> Reading is figured as an active process, a productive engagement with a text defined by incompleteness—a ‘hollow form’ into which the reader is invited to pour [their] own store of knowledge’.<sup>35</sup> Viewed from this perspective, we can see how the ‘Brief Interviews’ make us persistently aware of our work as readers in constructing or piecing together this uniquely ‘hollow’ text. In the silent questions of the interviewer, Wallace seems to offer a concretisation and escalation of Iser’s ‘elements of indeterminacy’, a starkly self-conscious manifestation of the ‘blank spaces’ present in every literary work. Beyond signalling experimental ‘constraint’ or formal fragmentation, these textual and narrative gaps are presented as silences which we feel compelled to fill, to respond to with our own impressions and ideas. Looking at ‘B.I. #2’, for example, we can see clearly how the text’s silences are patterned so as to induce the reader’s construction of a coherent narrative, a ‘complete’ conversation only partially accessible on the page:

---

<sup>33</sup> Iser, ‘The Reading Process’, p. 288.

<sup>34</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, pp. 169, 24.

<sup>35</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 143.

‘Sweetie, we need to talk. We’ve needed to for a while. I have I mean, I feel like. Can you sit?’

Q.

‘Well, I’d rather almost anything, but I care about you, and I’d rather anything than you getting hurt. That concerns me a lot, believe me.’

Q.

‘Because I care. Because I love you. Enough to be really honest.’

Q.

‘That sometimes I worry you’re going to get hurt. And that you don’t deserve it. To get hurt I mean.

Q, Q. (*BI*, p. 77)

This interview—which stands as the chronologically earliest available piece in the series—plays out not as a clinical interrogation, but rather a dialogue between the interviewer and a (typically ‘hideous’) romantic partner. Here, more unambiguously than anywhere else in the sequence, we are forced to fill out the silent spaces of the missing conversation: in the interviewer’s increasingly significant silences—the ‘Q.’s which are here variously urgently repeated (as above) or elsewhere pointedly italicised—we are made ever more acutely aware of our own active role in imaginatively constructing or ‘realising’ the absent portion of the narrative. In so starkly marking out these points of blankness and indeterminacy, Wallace invokes the incompleteness which Iser finds at the heart of every literary work, but, beyond this, also positions his own text as yet more radically unfinished, a fundamentally partial structure which everywhere demands that the reader attempt to organise and join together its broken pieces.<sup>36</sup> Boswell has commented on the ways in which the ‘Brief Interviews’ work to make us ‘participant[s] in the narrative’s construction’: he argues that Wallace ‘puts the reader “inside” the story as a character’, with the absent interviewer serving as the reader’s ‘proxy’, their ‘silent voice’ within the text.<sup>37</sup> While this notion of readerly ‘participation’ is central to Wallace’s strategy in the sequence, I would contest this suggestion that we are ever brought wholly ‘into’ the stories’ narrative. While the reader is invited to fill the spaces left by the interviewer, Q herself remains a persistently inaccessible figure, the ‘actual’ content of her answers stubbornly beyond our reach. Rather than serving as a ‘proxy’, Q’s absent presence comes to define the

<sup>36</sup> John Krasinski’s film adaptation of *Brief Interviews* (IFC Films, 2009), offers an illustrative contextual example of this kind of readerly organisation and ‘joining together’: in the film, Q is provided with a name (Sarah Quinn), an explicit motivation for the interviews (research for a doctoral thesis in anthropology), and clearly-defined relationships with a number of her ‘subjects’. Krasinski’s adaptation is pertinent, both in demonstrating the extent to which Wallace’s text demands this work of ‘filling in’ the narrative, and in showing how indispensable the spaces and gaps are in contributing to the sequence’s overall effect: without these points of silence, Krasinski’s film loses much of the unsettling power of Wallace’s work.

<sup>37</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, pp. 188, 193.

limits of our readerly participation, to serve as a reminder that our own subjective ‘construction’ of the text is itself always incomplete.

Even as they draw reflexive attention to the participatory nature of our reading, the ‘Interviews’ also make us concurrently aware of the limitations of this interaction with the text, the boundaries and restrictions placed on any attempt at ‘realisation’ of the work. This sense of limitation is seen in the persistent suggestion that the sequence’s silences, its openings, are only ever partially ‘open’. While Q’s silence leaves a kind of space for the reader to imaginatively ‘contribute’ to the narrative, this contribution is one which is invariably delineated, and thus constrained, by the surrounding text. As we have seen, the interviews’ redacted questions are carefully arranged to create the suggestion of weighted silence, a ‘blank’ which, although partially inaccessible, nonetheless holds a specific implied significance within the story. In attempting to ‘fill in’ these blanks, our apparently subjective interpretation is always at least partially delimited by the implied shape, tone, and texture of these silences, by their location and context within the interview. In self-consciously demarcating these textual gaps, the ‘Brief Interviews’ serve to make us aware simultaneously of both our role in constructing the text, and of the innately circumscribed nature of this readerly work. In this, Wallace again recalls Iser, whose phenomenological model is dependent on an awareness that, while the text can never ‘exercise complete control’ over the reader, ‘acts of comprehension’ are always necessarily ‘guided by the structures of the text’.<sup>38</sup> Even taking into account its points of silence and absence, the literary text is never completely ‘open’: rather, the reader is faced with a tension between ‘determinacy and indeterminacy’, between interpretative constriction and freedom.<sup>39</sup> Throughout the ‘Brief Interviews’, we see a dramatisation of this conflict: in their gaps and spaces, these stories create the suggestion of a system at once open *and* closed, inviting reflexive consideration of both the possibilities and the limits of our own engagement with the text. We are presented with a uniquely stark iteration of the conditional incompleteness found across Wallace’s writing: an unfinished-ness which leaves a defined space for the reader to ‘fill out’, while also serving as a reminder of the essential inaccessibility of the ‘finished’ work, the implied presence of a completion which remains beyond the limits of any individual, subjective reading.

---

<sup>38</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 24.

<sup>39</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 24.

Looking beyond the ‘Brief Interviews’, this notion of meaningful, structured silence, of conditional incompleteness, recurs in various forms throughout the collection. At times, silence is manifested in less obviously formalised terms; ‘The Depressed Person’, for example, does not feature the self-conscious structural breaches or gaps of the ‘Interviews’, but is nonetheless organised around a central speechlessness—an inarticulacy, outlined in the story’s opening sentence, which shapes and defines the entire subsequent narrative:

The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror. (*BI*, p. 31)

Even as it offers an extended, ostensibly structurally ‘complete’ text, ‘The Depressed Person’ is haunted throughout by this bald initial statement of the inexpressible, of a ‘terrible and unceasing emotional pain’ which is only amplified by its resistance to articulation. The story goes on to follow the ‘depressed person’ (a character who, like so many in *Brief Interviews*, is left significantly nameless) in her abortive attempts to express and explain this inexpressible horror—to ‘share at least the contextual shape of her unceasing psychic agony and feelings of isolation’ (*BI*, p. 32)—with the people surrounding her, namely her therapist and a ‘Support System’ of female friends and acquaintances, a group of half a dozen ‘rotating members’ whom she regularly calls ‘late in the evening, long-distance, for sharing and support and just a few well-chosen words to help her get some realistic perspective on the day’s despair’ (*BI*, pp. 32–3).

In many respects, the depressed person’s inarticulable pain recalls the depictions of clinical depression found throughout Wallace’s fiction, from the narrator’s evocation of a shapeless ‘black hole without a bottom’ in ‘The Planet Trillaphon’,<sup>40</sup> to Kate Gompert’s attempt to convey the unconveyable ‘sense of radical and thoroughgoing evil’, the ‘nausea of the cell and soul’ associated with ‘predator-grade depression’, in *Jest*.<sup>41</sup> Boswell goes so far as to argue that the story specifically offers a ‘final link back to the world of *Infinite Jest*’, an example of Wallace ‘taking to its formal and stylistic limit’ his earlier novel’s ‘familiar technique of dramatizing the self-reflexive nightmare of self-consciousness’.<sup>42</sup> Certainly, ‘The Depressed Person’ takes up the formal excesses of *Jest* (and distinguishes itself from the fragmentary

---

<sup>40</sup> Wallace, ‘The Planet Trillaphon as it Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing’, in *The David Foster Wallace Reader* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2014), pp. 5–19 (p. 10).

<sup>41</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 695.

<sup>42</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 204.



pieces of the ‘Interviews’) in its continued concern with the notion of ‘too many words’, a language which, in its expansion and proliferation, fails to communicate what is intended. We see this in the protagonist’s tortuously digressive attempts to relate her painful experiences to her Support System:

The depressed person averaged four interpolated apologies each time she recounted for supportive friends this type of painful and damaging past circumstance on the telephone, as well as a sort of preamble in which she attempted to describe how painful and frightening it was not to feel able to articulate the chronic depression’s excruciating pain itself but to have to resort to recounting examples that probably sounded, she always took care to acknowledge, dreary or self-pitying or like one of those people who are narcissistically obsessed with their ‘painful childhoods’ and ‘painful lives’ and wallow in their burdens and insist on recounting them at tiresome length to friends who are trying to be supportive and nurturing, and bore them and repel them. (*BI*, p. 32)

In her ‘preamble’ and ‘interpolated apologies’, her self-conscious anxiety that she not sound like ‘one of those people who are narcissistically obsessed with their “painful childhoods”’ (a description which seems an only too apt description of herself), the depressed person’s logorrhoea echoes *Jest*’s unmanageable masses of text. What differentiates this story, however, is the extent to which this excess speech is always seen to spiral outwards from the narrative’s opening instance of silence, the protagonist’s persistent inability to ‘articulate the chronic depression’s excruciating pain itself’. Wallace frames the depressed person’s excessive language, her interminable descriptions of ‘painful circumstances and historical insights about her depression and its etiology and texture and numerous symptoms’, as accumulating around this foundational point of speechlessness, this failure to convey ‘the overriding and unendurable reality of her every black minute on earth’ (*BI*, p. 49, n. 5). This swirling excess is reflected in the form of the text itself, and particularly in Wallace’s employment of footnotes. While these notes again gesture back towards *Jest*, their effect in ‘The Depressed Person’ is notably altered: where *Jest*’s endnotes were positioned at the end of the book—further stretching out the text’s excessive length, contributing to its self-conscious status as a massive, unbounded work—here they are repositioned as on-page footnotes, offering readers a visible formal analogue for the narrative’s digressions and fragmentations. At times, these footnotes themselves slip into excess, with single notes running over multiple pages, threatening to overwhelm the ‘main text’ altogether: note 5, for example, runs between pages 46 and 50, leaving space for only 5 lines of the ‘primary’ narrative on each intervening page. The resulting effect is one of language on top of language, of a text which has turned its excess inward on itself, not stretching into *Jest*’s

demonstrative bigness, but rather spiralling around a central silence, endlessly attempting, and failing, to articulate the unbearable reality of the depressed person's inner life.

For many readers, the story's excess of obsessive, hyper self-conscious, and inarticulate language can ultimately be seen to serve as a critique of the depressed person herself. The character has been read by critics as an almost 'hideous' figure: Max, for example, characterises her as a 'spoiled young woman' who 'repulses the reader with her obsessive neediness', and whose clinical symptoms are 'revealed to be nothing more than narcissism'.<sup>43</sup> In the midst of her compulsive attempts to articulate and 'talk through' her own inexpressible pain, the depressed person is almost entirely without empathy for, or indeed any meaningful awareness of, anyone else around her: the abrupt death (and apparent suicide) of her therapist, for example, is related only in terms of its negative impact on 'the depressed person's journey toward inner healing' (*BI*, p. 43), while the terminal illness of a key member of her Support System is described as conveniently offering the depressed person 'nearly unlimited conflict-free availability and time to share on the telephone' (*BI*, p. 55). I would, however, contest interpretations of the story as a straightforward critique of its protagonist: while we as readers are confronted with the depressed person's significant personal failings, the narrative's unbearable effect derives from the fact that we are placed *alongside* her within the text. Throughout the story, we are claustrophobically trapped, if not within the depressed person's consciousness, then rather within the chaotic, inarticulate spirals of narcissistic language with which she attempts and fails to communicate her pain. We, like the depressed person herself, are forced at every turn to negotiate with the speechlessness at the narrative's centre, with a silence which is only more tortuous in its inexpressibility.

At the close of the story, the reader is confronted with a concluding instance of weighted silence, as the depressed person—who has come to self-consciously question, and agonise over, her 'capacity for basic human empathy and compassion and caring' (*BI*, p. 57)—finally asks her terminally ill friend directly (albeit in typically tortuous, digressive terms) for an honest, unvarnished assessment of her character:

---

<sup>43</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 241. Max even suggests that the story should be read alongside Wallace's biography as a kind of 'revenge fiction' directed specifically towards Elizabeth Wurtzel—the author of *Prozac Nation*—with whom Wallace had had a brief personal relationship. For Max, the story serves as a 'way of getting even with Wurtzel for treating him as a statue (or, she would say, refusing to have sex with him)' (p. 241).

So, the depressed person said, her voice breaking, she was begging her now single most trusted friend to share her very most private judgment of the depressed person's 'character's or 'spirit's capacity for human caring. She needed her feedback, the depressed person wept, even if that feedback was partly negative or hurtful or traumatic or had the potential to push her right over the emotional edge once and for all—even, she pleaded, if that feedback lay on nothing more than the coldly intellectual or 'head' level of objective verbal description; she would settle even for that, she promised, hunched and trembling in a near-fetal position atop her workstation cubicle's ergonomic chair—and therefore now urged her terminally ill friend to go on, to not hold back, to let her have it: what words and terms might be applied to describe and assess such a solipsistic, self-consumed, endless emotional vacuum and sponge as she now appeared to herself to be? How was she to decide and describe—even to herself, looking inward and facing herself—what all she'd so painfully learned said about her? (*BI*, pp. 57–8)

The narrative concludes with this culminating question—a question unanswered and unanswerable, met only with the silences of the terminally ill friend's non-response and the running-out of the text itself. In many respects, this 'hollow space' echoes the silences of the 'Brief Interviews': like Q's redacted questions, this 'open ending' seemingly leaves space for the reader to imaginatively construct an unwritten response. As in the interviews, however, we remain aware that this space is only ever partially 'open', always at least partially circumscribed by the text. Even as she asks for her friend's 'brutally candid assessment' (*BI*, p. 57) the depressed person's intense anxieties (her 'hunched and trembling', 'near fetal' posture, for example), endless qualifications (such as the double-edged, ostensible allowance that the inevitably 'negative or hurtful or traumatic' feedback might 'push her right over the emotional edge'), and self-deprecatory anticipations (including her self-identification as a 'solipsistic, self-consumed, endless emotional vacuum and sponge'), all work to direct the shape and tone of her friend's response, closing off the possibility of any truly 'honest' or unvarnished answer. The story's open ending seems to point the reader towards a further instance of the unspeakable: in asking 'what words and terms might be applied to describe and assess' her character, the depressed person gestures towards a point which, like her own inarticulable pain, is beyond the reach of language. The story as a whole, then, is bookended by these opening and closing points of speechlessness. While, unlike the 'Brief Interviews', these are not visible 'gaps' which we as readers are led to 'fill', these silences nonetheless serve to organise the text positioned between them, to profoundly inform and shape our reading of the work.

Elsewhere in the collection, meanwhile, we find examples of a collision between the starkly concretised structural breaks of the 'Interviews' and the more subtle foundational silences of 'The Depressed Person'—as seen, for example, in the two connected pieces which

comprise ‘Adult World’. ‘Adult World I’ initially presents another narrative shaped around a central instance of plot-level speechlessness. The story follows a further dysfunctional romantic relationship, a young married couple whose problems—as in ‘The Depressed Person’—spiral outwards from a central issue, laid out in the opening sentence:

For the first three years, the young wife worried that their lovemaking together was somehow hard on his thingie. (*BI*, p. 137)

The subsequent narrative follows the ‘young wife’ in her developing anxieties over the problems in the couple’s sex life, problems which she believes must originate in ‘something wrong with her’ (*BI*, p. 137), and which she attempts to address with a variety of strategies (including visits to, and purchases from, the titular ‘Adult World’ sex shop). At the heart of this anxiety is the recurring notion of something unspoken, a silence which exists between the couple: the wife is tortured by the sense that ‘whatever the problem with her was [. . .] there was no way to talk about it with him—there was no way the wife could think of to even start such a conversation’ (*BI*, p. 141). Once again, this instance of the inarticulable seems to establish a ‘blank space’ at the heart of the story, a silence which informs all the wife’s various anxieties and actions, which shapes everything in the surrounding text. In ‘Adult World II’, however, we are abruptly confronted with a very different silence, a textual ‘space’ much closer to the formal fragmentation of the ‘Brief Interviews’. ‘Adult World II’ is presented not as a completed story but rather a ‘SCHEMA’ (*BI*, p. 155), a skeletal outline of the narrative’s latter half, complete with itemised section numbers (1a, 1a(1), 1b, 1c, etc.), radically abbreviated language (‘Meanwhile F.L. is answering J’s org question in vehement neg., tears appearing in eye’ (*BI*, p. 157)), self-conscious markers of technique (‘{Abrupt p.o.v. change}’ (*BI*, p. 158)), and self-deprecatory authorial notes-to-self (‘N.B.: *avoid easy gags*’ (*BI*, p. 159)). In this narrative collapse, Wallace presents us with a text which appears starkly unfinished: Boswell reads ‘Adult World II’ as little more than the ‘author’s working notes’, a ‘sketch of a sketch, a frame to a frame’.<sup>44</sup>

In many respects, this reflexive focus on the construction and workings of the narrative feels like a typically postmodern, metafictional technique: an echo and extension of Barth’s self-aware discussions of ‘Freitag’s Triangle’ in ‘Lost in the Funhouse’.<sup>45</sup> In interviews Wallace

<sup>44</sup> Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 204.

<sup>45</sup> Barth, ‘Lost in the Funhouse’, p. 96.

himself suggested that the story's 'formal stunt piloting' should be read as a response to the limitations of post-Joycean 'epiphanic' short story form:

The big reason to have 'Adult World II' in outline form is that for myself as a reader I don't buy epiphanies done dramatically anymore. You know: 'She gazed out of the window. Suddenly, the revelation hit her face'. I begin wincing when I'm reading shit like that. I don't think readers can buy epiphanies anymore . . . I like stuff that's moving, but I don't want to be perceived as manipulative, and I don't like to be manipulative.<sup>46</sup>

Viewed from this perspective, we can see how 'Adult World I' is everywhere constructed so as to gesture towards an anticipated moment of epiphanic revelation, one self-consciously signposted from the start of the narrative—as, for example, in the wife's retrospective interjections, which explicitly mention a future point 'after she had had an epiphany and rapidly matured' (*BI*, p. 139)—and repeatedly returned to throughout the text (culminating in an extended discussion of the 'secular psychodevelopmental' definition of 'epiphany', and its rarity of occurrence outside the constructed worlds of 'dramatic representations, religious iconography, and the "magical thinking" of children' (*BI*, p. 150)). In light of this, the silence at the centre of 'Adult World I'—the husband's hidden sexual 'secret', and the resulting speechlessness between the couple—can be seen to function as a kind of 'mystery', a question whose anticipated answer will, it is suggested, result in a life-changing moment of realisation for the young wife, a shift from inexperienced childhood (as exemplified in the initial baby-talk references to the husband's 'thingie'), into mature adulthood (as signalled in the sudden disclosure of the wife's full name—Jeni Roberts—in the moments leading up to her epiphany). The abrupt shift into schematic form in 'Adult World II' serves as a self-conscious frustration and deconstruction of this expected moment of realisation, as both Jeni's epiphanic revelation ('J. follows F.L.'s gaze out fast-food window & sees husband's special vanity license plate among vehicles in Adult World lot: → epiphany' (*BI*, p., 156)), and the husband's unspoken secret (that he is a 'Secret Compulsive Masturbator', whose ostensible bouts of insomnia serve as cover for his own trips to Adult World to 'purchase/view/masturbate self raw to XXX films & images' (*BI*, p., 156)) are dispensed with in flat, shorthand terms. In denying, or at least occluding access to, this central moment of dramatic crisis, Wallace invites us to consider the limitations of the short story form, the restrictions inherent in the 'constructed', artificial nature of fictional narrative. Zadie Smith has read 'Adult World's' 'unfinished, unfilled in' second part

---

<sup>46</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with Patrick Arden' (1999), in *Conversations*, pp. 94–100 (p. 98).

as offering readers access to the inner workings of the story, a revelation of the ‘mechanical levers behind the *Wizard of Oz* façade’.<sup>47</sup> For Smith, this metafictionality is employed not merely as demonstration of Wallace’s skills as a ‘pyrotechnical stylist’, but rather as a gesture of ‘honest[y]’, a means of showing what is usually obscured by the structures of narrative form; this, of course, chimes with Wallace’s own stated desire to avoid the ‘manipulative’ quality of traditional fictional epiphanies.<sup>48</sup> In these terms, the unfinished-ness of ‘Adult World II’ is framed as another kind of textual ‘openness’, another example of Wallace breaking open the confines of his work, of handing some kind of control or agency back over to the reader.

Here, however, as throughout *Brief Interviews*, we are also made inescapably aware of the limitations of this deliberate ‘openness’. This is partially seen in the sheer degree of the text’s incompleteness: beyond the ‘stunt pilotry’ of its postmodern experimentation, ‘Adult World II’ presents a narrative which almost literally falls apart, an incompleteness manifested in unprecedentedly concrete terms. In this incompleteness, Wallace strays—beyond his desire for a non-manipulative fiction—towards the frustrations and difficulties associated with an actually unfinished work: Smith, for example, goes on to suggest that the story’s ‘shock of the backstage glimpse is just that, a shock’, one which eventually ‘wears off and does not satisfy as the full story might have’;<sup>49</sup> while C. J. Evans argues that it ‘seems like Wallace lost interest in his own story and didn’t want to take the time to work it out, preferring to step back and provide the more nominal thrill of the authorial view’.<sup>50</sup> These expressions of readerly dissatisfaction reflect the extent to which Wallace’s text embraces this aspect of deliberate broken-ness, this sense of a work which, in attempting to avoid readerly ‘manipulation’, fails to offer the basic prerequisites of a finished story. As with all the instances of the unfinished found through the collection, however, this is an incompleteness which is always in some way partial or conditional. In its schematic form, ‘Adult World II’, even as it resists the ‘closure’ of a complete narrative, nonetheless makes us aware of how it works to direct the reader’s response, presenting us, as in the blank spaces of the ‘Interviews’, with a silence which is always self-consciously defined and

---

<sup>47</sup> Zadie Smith, ‘*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace’, in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 257–300 (p. 289).

<sup>48</sup> Smith, p. 289.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, p. 289.

<sup>50</sup> C. J. Evans, ‘All Its Horror and Unbound Power: David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*’, *Quarterly Conversation*, 6 June 2011, n.p., para. 9

<<http://quarterlyconversation.com/david-foster-wallace-brief-interviews-with-hideous-men>> [accessed 2 August 2019].

shaped by the printed work. Across the two parts of ‘Adult World’, we are confronted with a progression towards a more radical incompleteness: even as Wallace ‘fills in’ the silences of the story’s first section, the ‘schematic’ of the second part descends into a more fundamental unfinished-ness, one which, once again, seems poised between one the one hand directing our reading, and on the other leaving a blank space, a textual silence for the reader to fill.

The various strategies of silence and incompleteness found throughout *Brief Interviews* are brought together in ‘Octet’. Within criticism of Wallace, ‘Octet’ has frequently been regarded as a text of particular significance: Hering, for example, characterises the story as a ‘central reflective and refractive surface that governs and mediates the collection around it’,<sup>51</sup> while Iain Williams suggests that it ‘may be quite profitably read as a representative or microcosmic example of Wallace’s entire oeuvre’.<sup>52</sup> This sense of ‘Octet’ as ‘microcosm’ or ‘reflective centre’ is supported both in the positioning of the story—at the precise mid-point of the collection—and in its unusual form. ‘Octet’ is structured as a series of ‘pop quizzes’, short pieces which resemble miniaturised versions of *Brief Interviews*’s stories, complete with nameless characters (the first two pieces, for example, feature ‘Two [unidentified] late-stage terminal drug addicts’ and ‘Two men, X and Y’ (*BI*, p. 111), respectively), oblique depictions of interpersonal disconnection, and titles suggesting a formally incomplete series (in a story titled ‘Octet’, we are notably presented with Pop Quizzes 4, 6, 7, 6(A), and finally 9). Beyond this, the story offers a reflection of the surrounding collection in its presentation of a radical unfinished-ness, a ‘falling apart’ introduced, at least initially, in gradual terms: ‘Pop Quiz 6’, for example, fizzles out before reaching its concluding ‘question’ (‘In fact the whole *mise en scène* here seems to shot through with ambiguity to make a very good Pop Quiz, it turns out’ (*BI*, p. 113)); while Pop Quiz 6(A)—an ostensible attempt to ‘[t]ry it again’ (*BI*, p. 114)—extends into another separate narrative, featuring the same characters (the aforementioned ‘X’ and ‘Y’) from the earlier piece. This culminates in ‘Pop Quiz 9’, which abruptly shifts into a metafictional deconstruction of both the story’s preceding pieces and the ‘project’ underlining the entire sequence:

You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. You are attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces, pieces which as it happens are not *contes*

<sup>51</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 112.

<sup>52</sup> Iain Williams, ‘(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace’s “Octet”’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56.3 (2015), 299–314 (p. 300).

*philosophiques* and not vignettes or scenarios or allegories or fables, exactly, although neither are they really qualifiable as ‘short stories’ [. . .]. How exactly the cycle’s short pieces are supposed to work is hard to describe. Maybe they’re supposed to compose a certain sort of ‘interrogation’ of the person reading them, somehow – i.e. palpations, feelers into the interstices of her sense of something, etc. . . . though what that ‘something’ is remains maddeningly hard to pin down [. . .] (*BI*, p. 123)

In this second-person delineation of the ‘fiction writer’s’ intentions and strategies, Wallace invites, almost explicitly, comparison between the miniature ‘belletristic pieces’ of ‘Octet’ and the surrounding texts of the wider *Brief Interviews* collection—texts which feel comparable in their resistance to classification as ‘short stories’, and which, in their self-conscious moments of silence and absence, seem to demand a level of readerly engagement which corresponds with the ‘interrogation’ discussed here. Hering suggests that the ‘Octet’’s pieces ‘should be read as an inversion of the format of the brief interviews themselves’, an iteration of the interrogatory ‘interview’ format in which the answers, rather than the questions, have been excised from the text, in which we as readers take the place of the interviewees.<sup>53</sup> In this way the ‘pop quizzes’ follow the interviews in demarcating the silent spaces for our readerly response: by concluding each piece with a ‘quiz question’ directed at the reader, Wallace leads us, again, to consider both the nature of our participatory role in ‘constructing’ the literary work, and the extent to which this response is inevitably shaped and constrained by the printed text.

This comes to a head in the metafictional turn of ‘Pop Quiz 9’. Even as we are presented with the details of the hypothetical fiction writer’s ‘interrogatory’ project, we are also confronted with the ways in which this project, and by extension the work as a whole, is inescapably incomplete:

So you do an eight-part cycle of these little mortise-and-tenon pieces. And it ends up a total fiasco. Five of the eight pieces don’t work at all – meaning they don’t interrogate or palpate what you want them to, plus are too contrived or too cartoonish or too annoying or all three – and you have to toss them out.  
(*BI*, p. 124)

By positioning the story as a ‘total fiasco’, an essentially failed work (as exemplified in its status as an unfinished, five-part ‘octet’), Wallace here—as in ‘Adult World’—stages a narrative collapse manifested in almost literal terms. As ‘Pop Quiz 9’ progresses, the speaker goes on to further articulate and enact this failure: the narrative fragments into footnotes (which—like those of ‘The Depressed Person’—extend into excess, crowding out the ‘main text’), offering extended plot summaries of the ‘five unworkable pieces’ which ‘just plain didn’t

---

<sup>53</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 30.



work' (*BI*, p. 125, n. 3). This self-conscious focus on the story's incomplete status eventually directs the reader towards a final 'open space'. Towards the end of the 'quiz', the speaker raises the radical possibility that the 'fiction writer' could 'simply ask the reader' what they think of the story, could 'address the reader directly and ask her straight out whether she's feeling anything like what you feel' (*BI*, pp. 130–31). We are then offered an extended enumeration of the prerequisites for, and risks involved in, this kind of direct authorial address: the 'fiction writer', we are told, must be willing to be '100% honest. Meaning not just sincere but almost naked' (*BI*, p. 131); they must also accept the possibility that they come across as a 'self-consciously inbent schmuck, or like just another manipulative pseudopomo Bullshit Artist who's trying to salvage a fiasco by dropping back to a metadimension and commenting on the fiasco itself' (*BI*, p. 135). These considerations all finally serve as preamble, building towards—and delineating the shape of—the story's concluding silence, as the speaker offers a closing directive to the reader (in their guise as 'fiction writer'): 'So decide' (*BI*, p. 136).

This final, outwardly-directed 'interrogation' stands as one of the most intriguing and significant silent spaces of Wallace's entire body of work. For many critics, 'Octet's concluding moments work as a demonstration of the very essence of Wallace's fictional project: an attempt to 'break through' the ironic strategies of 'manipulative pseudopomo bullshit', to employ a kind of self-reflexive 'meta-metafictional' technique as a means of addressing the reader sincerely and directly. Konstantinou argues that the ending to 'Pop Quiz 9' establishes a direct communication between reader and author, offering a degree of unmediated access to Wallace himself:

In 'Octet', Wallace inverts the procedures of metafiction, asking not that we become aware of the artifice of his fictional exercise, the artifice of the artificer, but rather that we believe in the total, genuine honesty, the '100% candor' [. . .] of the author – not the narrator, but *the author*, Wallace.<sup>54</sup>

While Konstantinou's framing of the story as a kind of 'meta-nonfiction' is somewhat extreme, its suggestion that the story's final 'interrogation' opens up a space for reciprocal communication between reader and author (or, alternatively, reader and text), is echoed by other critics: Kelly reads 'Octet's ending as a 'dialogic appeal to the reader's attestation and judgment',<sup>55</sup> while Hayes-Brady suggests that the story uses its 'ostensible conclusion' to 'break

---

<sup>54</sup> Konstantinou, 'No Bull', p. 94.

<sup>55</sup> Kelly, 'New Sincerity', p. 145.

open the expected closure of the narrative system, exposing the narrative to multiple—perhaps infinite—new directions’.<sup>56</sup> More recently, however, other commentators have offered a counterpoint to this critical consensus, questioning the ‘openness’ or dialogic potential of Wallace’s story. Williams has convincingly argued that ‘Octet’’s ostensibly open, ‘interrogatory’ ending can in fact be seen to be strictly circumscribed and directed by the text:

At first, ‘Octet’ might seem structurally anarchic, with cyclical loops of reference that seem to repeat the same point insistently [. . .] However, Wallace’s method is profoundly logical; introducing successive instances of irony and rebuttal that add substance to his overall claim for sincerity as each level of irony is negotiated. [. . .] this method leaves very little option for readers other than to take the ‘fiction writer’’s claims as sincere.<sup>57</sup>

For Williams, the complex, nested structures of self-awareness at play within ‘Pop Quiz 9’—the successive introduction of layers of meta- and meta-metafictionality—all serve as rhetorical strategies directing the reader towards the specific outcome of *trusting* the speaker, of accepting this possibility of direct author/reader communication. Viewed in these terms, the story’s final ‘So decide’ does not really offer a decision at all: like the blank questions of the ‘Brief Interviews’, this is a silence shaped by the text, a space only partially ‘open’ for readerly participation. In this, Wallace’s apparent ‘dialogic appeal’ is thus inescapably *monologic*, falling short of the reciprocal, two-sided readerly participation which these interrogatory questions seem to promise.<sup>58</sup>

What ‘Octet’ finally directs us towards, then, is a consideration of the conditional incompleteness present across all of Wallace’s fiction. ‘Octet’’s concluding unfinished-ness does not, in the end, present a space of ‘infinite possibility’, but rather a version of the conflict between openness and closedness, silence and speech, which we have found across the *Brief Interviews* collection, and in different forms across Wallace’s entire body of work. In these self-consciously incomplete texts, Wallace leads us to confront the tension between the text’s directing influence and the reader’s creative participation which takes place in our engagement with all works of fiction: we are reminded again of Iser’s conception of the interplay of ‘determinacy and indeterminacy’ which exists at the heart of the reading process. Ultimately,

---

<sup>56</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, pp. 108.

<sup>57</sup> Williams, p. 305.

<sup>58</sup> We here recall Hering’s discussion of the ‘recurrent oscillation between narrative models of monologism and dialogism’ in Wallace’s writing, the extent to which the dialogic potential of Wallace’s work is threatened by ‘the continual risk of a master discourse engendered by the degree of Wallace’s authorial presence’ (Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 7).

the silence at the end of ‘Octet’—and, with this, ‘hollow spaces’ found throughout *Brief Interviews*—are, like the silence at the end of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, simultaneously meaningful and inaccessible: while their outlines are traced, and perhaps even constricted, by the printed text, they nonetheless retain something beyond readerly control, beyond the reach of our interpretation: a ‘gap’ which persistently remains between text and reader.

‘a bodyshaped area of space’: *Oblivion*

In contrast with the fragmentary pieces of *Brief Interviews*, the stories collected in *Oblivion* appear, at least on the surface, to return to something of a more conventional shape and structure. The collection’s eight texts abandon the overt formal experimentation of Wallace’s immediately preceding work, moving towards longer, sustained narratives—‘The Suffering Channel’, for example, extends almost to novella-length—missing the visible, self-conscious incompleteness which marked *Brief Interviews* (indeed, *Oblivion* as a whole is even notably restrained in its employment of footnotes). Alongside this shift, these stories are characterised by a further contraction in scope, albeit one manifested very differently from the formal restriction of *Brief Interviews*. Surveying *Oblivion*, Boswell comments that the stories ‘provide almost zero in the way of character interaction or dramatic action’, going on to argue that the collection’s ‘vast, unbroken wall of text [. . .] locates the reader in the protagonist’s word-drunk interior and traps her there for [each] story’s grueling duration’.<sup>59</sup> In this claustrophobic interiority, we find Wallace paring down the cacophony of ‘hideous’ voices which characterised the previous collection. *Oblivion*’s various characters seem more than ever defined by an essential similarity, a sameness which Chad Harbach has summarised via a ‘composite sketch of *Oblivion*’s several protagonists’:

[. . .] he is a flabby, heterosexual male in his late thirties, with a midlevel corporate job, a beleaguered or nonexistent love life, a habit of curling scare-quotes around a few too many of his words, and a vocabulary that Wallace himself would no doubt describe as ‘literally incredible’.<sup>60</sup>

While somewhat reductive, Harbach’s sketch is useful in suggesting the extent to which these various voices seem to sound—particularly in their shared tendency towards technical

<sup>59</sup> Boswell, “‘The Constant Monologue Inside Your Head’: *Oblivion* and the Nightmare of Consciousness”, in *Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, pp. 151–170 (p. 152).

<sup>60</sup> Chad Harbach, ‘David Foster Wallace!’, *N+1*, 2004, n.p., para. 4 <<https://nplusonemag.com/issue-1/reviews/david-foster-wallace/>> [accessed 2 August 2019].

terminology and logorrheic excess—more and more like the voice of Wallace himself—or, more accurately, like the particular voice adopted by Wallace in his non-fiction writing. In his close analysis of Wallace’s syntax, Simon de Bourcier suggests that *Oblivion* ‘indulges Wallace’s characteristic authorial voice in all its oppressive maximalism’, and we can see how, in hewing ever more closely to the voice of ‘David Foster Wallace’, these stories intensify the collection’s abiding feeling of constriction and claustrophobia, creating the unsettling suggestion that we are trapped not only within the perspectives of these characters, but perhaps also within the ‘word-drunk interior’ of Wallace himself.<sup>61</sup>

Looking more closely at *Oblivion*’s ‘unbroken walls of text’, however, it becomes clear that these stories are still marked by the incompleteness which we have identified across all of Wallace’s fiction. Even in their apparent shift towards comparative formal coherence, *Oblivion*’s texts are punctuated by narrative ‘gaps’ comparable to (if less overtly visible than) those of *Brief Interviews*. There is clear evidence of this in ‘Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature’: a text first published in *McSweeney’s* in 1998 as further iteration of *Brief Interviews*’s ‘Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders’ sequence, and which as such offers an intriguing illustration of the continuities (and discontinuities) between the two collections.<sup>62</sup> Like so many of *Oblivion*’s stories, ‘Philosophy’ is claustrophobically monovocal. Throughout, we as readers are confined within the first-person perspective of a single narrating male voice, one who displays many of the key features of Harbach’s ‘typical *Oblivion* protagonist’: from his extensive technical vocabulary (‘there was still the matter of the gaping mouth and mandibular distension and protrudent tendons and so forth’; to his recurring, and somewhat irritating, verbal tics (including a habit of placing random phrases—such as ‘*insanely frightened*’—in italics); to the sustained suggestion of his romantic frustration (‘Respecting mating I have been on dates but there was insufficient chemistry’).<sup>63</sup> This readerly confinement is only exacerbated by a primary ‘plot’ which offers little in the way of dramatic action, providing a digressive account of the narrator’s various bus journeys accompanying his mother

<sup>61</sup> Simon de Bourcier, “‘They All Sound Like David Foster Wallace’: Syntax and Narrative in *Infinite Jest*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*’, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5.1 (2017), pp. 1–30 (pp. 2–3) <<https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.207>>.

<sup>62</sup> See David Coughlan, “‘Sappy or no, it’s true’: Affect and Expression in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*”, in *Critical Insights*, pp. 160–175 (p. 162).

<sup>63</sup> Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 182. Further references to *Oblivion* in this chapter will be placed in parentheses in the text.

to and from her attorney's office, following a botched cosmetic surgery which has left her face horrifyingly frozen in a '*chronic mask of insane terror*' (O, p. 182).

Over the course of 'Philosophy', however, the coherence of this relatively quotidian (if vaguely unsettling) description is repeatedly ruptured by seemingly offhand or unintentional moments of slippage, moments which work to suggest the presence of something hidden beneath the story's seemingly smooth surface. These narrative 'breaches' gesture towards a buried or otherwise unaddressed truth: from the opening sentence's fleeting reference to the speaker's time in prison ('Then just as I was being released [. . .]' (O, p. 182)); to the snatches describing his unsettling appearance and clothing ('Physically I am a large specimen and have distinctive coloration [. . .] There are also the goggles worn and specially constructed gloves for field work' (O, p. 183)); to the belatedly-revealed details of his mother's initial accident ('Her original liability was that a worker at the assembly plant actually glued a can's nozzle on facing backward, I submit a clear-cut case of failing to exercise due care' (O, p. 188)). The most notable examples of this slippage, however, are found in the abruptly interpolated descriptions of the horrifying incident which led to the narrator's imprisonment:

And the special perpendicular seats in the bus's anterior segment comprise a good vantage from which to watch the driver wrestle with the bus. Nor did I have anything against the boy in any way. Nor is there anything in any state, county or local ordinance restricting what varieties you can study or stipulating in any way that cultivating more than a certain number thereof constitutes reckless endangerment or a hazard to the community at large. If the appointment is AM then the driver sometimes keeps a newspaper folded in a hutch by the automatic coin or token box [. . .] (O, p. 184)

This incident—involving, as gradually becomes clear, a young boy falling into a garage housing the narrator's large collection of widow spiders—is only ever related in these incongruous glimpses, these fractures which reveal a buried, and far more disturbing, narrative behind the speaker's otherwise uneventful monologue. This strategy of gradually and obliquely revealing a secondary, 'hidden' story beneath or behind his primary plot has been addressed by Hayes-Brady, who refers to this technique as 'skeletal narrative':

Skeletal narrative refers to a strategy by which Wallace embeds the seeds of textual and interpretive unraveling within the narrative voice of a story; a narrator (often but not always first-person) begins to tell a story, but through asides or tonal slippage reveals another layer of narrative under the surface, ultimately losing control of the primary narrative vocabulary and confessing or revealing what was hidden.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, pp. 138–9.

For Hayes-Brady, this strategy can be regarded as one of the ‘defining features’ of Wallace’s writing, albeit one only fully ‘mastered’ in the stories of *Oblivion*.<sup>65</sup> Looking again at ‘Philosophy’, we can see how these instances of ‘tonal slippage’ play a role analogous to the points of blankness which we encountered across *Brief Interviews*. In these ‘breaches’, Wallace seems once again to gesture self-consciously—if less immediately perceptibly—towards the ‘hollow places’ at the heart of his work.

This sense of a continuity between the formal ‘silences’ of *Brief Interviews* and these more subtly-incorporated narrative blanks is further reflected in the various instances of actual silence found through ‘Philosophy’. Although less visible than, for example, the absent questions of the ‘Interviews’, ‘Philosophy’ is marked throughout by points of speechlessness, silences which here take the form of specific words left conspicuously unspoken throughout the story. We see this, for example, in the brand name of the malfunctioning ‘common household spray’ which caused the narrator’s mother’s initial accident, the name of which (‘R – – d!’) is blanked-out as, we are told, a central condition of her product liability settlement (*O*, p. 189). In a similar, if less obviously noticeable, way, the crucial word ‘spiders’—the central object of the speaker’s obsession—is also markedly absent, with reference made only to ‘specimens’ (*O*, p. 183), ‘the phylum *arthropodae*’ (*O*, p. 185), and, eventually, ‘widows’ (*O*, p. 187). Perhaps most strikingly, we see this in the narrator’s repeated references to a pointedly unnamed Hitchcock film: in describing his mother’s surgically-induced ‘mask of insane terror’, the narrator explicitly compares her with ‘someone in the shower scene of Hitchcock’ (*O*, p. 182), and later meditates on the fact that ‘less than a centimetre either way is the difference between smooth youthful eyes and the chronic expression of Vivian Leigh [*sic*] in the shower in the 1960 classic of that name’ (*O*, p. 188). In each of these references, ‘that name’—*Psycho*—is deliberately and ominously occluded, a silence which only invites consideration of the uneasy parallels between the speaker (with his unsettling relationship with his ‘Mother’) and the murderous protagonist of Hitchcock’s film.

In comparison with the unavoidable structural gaps of *Brief Interviews*, these ‘blanks’ are integrated more seamlessly into ‘Philosophy’’s narrative: far from visibly fragmenting the text, these scattered silences require our readerly attention, to the extent that they might be missed altogether on an initial reading of the text. Nevertheless, these ‘hollow places’ function

---

<sup>65</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 144.

in a way comparable to the more overt silences of Wallace's previous collection, leading us, once again, to consider the unfilled spaces found in every literary text, the aspects of 'blankness' which form the basis of our readerly engagement with any literary work. In Hayes-Brady's analysis, the hollow structure of 'skeletal narrative'—the 'gap' which occupies the space 'between narrative strata'—is seen as a space where 'interpretive possibilities flourish'; she almost directly echoes Iser's theories of reading in her discussion of the way these 'copious narrative blanks' serve to 'mak[e] the reader a co-producer of the text'.<sup>66</sup> Here, as with *Brief Interviews*, however, the text can be seen to place equal self-conscious focus on the inevitable constraints placed on this readerly engagement. While we as readers are invited to 'fill' the gaps found throughout 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature', the fact that each of the story's 'silences' leaves space only for a single, specific word—be it '*Raid!*', 'spider', or '*Psycho*'—creates the sense more than ever of a text which circumscribes our reading, which points our interpretation in a specific direction.

Surveying *Oblivion* as a whole, we find these 'breaches'—and the associated sense of 'skeletal', hollowed-out narrative structure—recurring throughout. In 'Mister Squishy', the primary plot—centred around an advertising agency's organisation of a focus group to gauge public response to a new line of 'dark and exceptionally dense and moist-looking snack cakes' (*O*, p. 5)—is gradually punctured, and eventually wholly overwhelmed, by a series of proliferating 'slippages' revealing a buried foundation of layered corporate hierarchies, machinations, and plots, professional double- and triple-crossings which spiral into an almost unfollowable complexity. In 'Oblivion', meanwhile, the speaker's tortuously protracted description of a snoring-related marital dispute is similarly punctuated by abrupt 'fractures' in the narrative, surreal visions and disembodied voices which eventually point us towards another buried 'reality': in the story's final lines, it is revealed that the preceding narrative has in fact been the dream of the ostensible narrator's sleeping wife, a concluding 'twist' which forces the reader to (re)consider the 'hollowness' at the text's centre. This strategy has been commented upon by various critics: Charles Nixon, for example, suggests that throughout *Oblivion* Wallace demands a 'detective-like fascination on the reader's part',<sup>67</sup> while Boswell notes how the collection's frequent narrative fractures and twists work to 'open up an outer layer of interiority

<sup>66</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, pp. 144, 139.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Nixon, 'Attention, Retention, and Extension in *Oblivion: Stories*', in *Critical Insights*, pp. 176–191 (p. 181).

into which the story's principal layer has been nesting all along', tasking readers with the 'entropic task of ordering and assessing' the 'dense descriptive' work.<sup>68</sup> Even in their more conventionally-structured forms, *Oblivion*'s stories continue to place focus on the nature and process of readerly engagement, the work (and the limitations) involved in any reading of a literary text. To a certain extent, this focus is again reflected in instances of speechlessness and silence found across the collection: Thomas Tracey has commented on the various points in *Oblivion* where 'traumatic experience' is rendered in soundless terms—from the narrator's disturbingly silent vision of his father's workplace in 'The Soul is Not a Smithy', to the lack of sound attached to the looping televised images of human anguish in 'The Suffering Channel'—arguing that these silent moments offer a 'striking contrast' with a series of texts 'so replete with incessant human speech'.<sup>69</sup> Looking beyond these specific examples, however, I would argue that, within *Oblivion*, notions of textual absence and 'hollowness' are more frequently reframed in a way distinct from the speechlessness seen in *Brief Interviews*, a change which reflects the shift in style and focus which takes place between the two collections.

Throughout *Oblivion*, we encounter points where this absence is embodied by specific characters, characters who—in their radical emptiness—seem to serve as visible emblems for the points of blankness within these stories. The collection's central illustrative example of this embodied hollowness is found in its shortest piece 'Incarnations of Burned Children', a three-page story which relates a brief instance of almost unspeakable horror:

The Daddy was around the side of the house hanging a door for the tenant when he heard the child's screams and the Mommy's voice gone high between them. He could move fast, and the back porch gave onto the kitchen, and before the screen door had banged shut behind him the Daddy had taken the scene in whole, the overturned pot on the floortile before the stove and the burner's blue jet and the floor's pool of water still steaming as its many arms extended, the toddler in his baggy diaper standing rigid with steam coming off his hair and his chest and shoulders scarlet and his eyes rolled up and mouth open very wide and seeming somehow separate from the sounds that issued, the Mommy down on one knee with the dishrag dabbing pointlessly at him and matching the screams with cries of her own, hysterical so she was almost frozen. (*O*, p. 114)

While seemingly familiar in its maximalist expansion, on closer reading this opening sentence can be seen to diverge from Wallace's usual looping overabundance of language. We are free, here, from the monologic, self-conscious verbosity which characterises *Oblivion*'s other stories

---

<sup>68</sup> Boswell, 'Nightmare of Consciousness', p. 164.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Tracey, 'Representations of Trauma in David Foster Wallace's *Oblivion*', in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, pp. 172–186 (p. 186).



(or much of Wallace's earlier writing); instead, 'Incarnations's 'wall of text' is used to convey an overwhelming breathlessness, a stretching-out of a single, traumatic moment in time. Rather than presenting Wallace's usual reflexive concern with excess language, the story is instead organised around points of wordless noise: the screams and cries of both mother and infant are sounds which fail to convey anything beyond generalised horror, which seem 'somehow separate' from the people making them. The figure of wordless vocalisation recurs throughout 'Incarnations', from the description of the 'Mommy' 'with one hand waving around in the area of her mouth and uttering objectless words', to the child's continuing to breathlessly scream 'a high pure shining sound' (*O*, p. 115). These non-communicative vocalisations become crucial at the end of the story, as the cause of the child's continued screaming is revealed to be the boiling water collected in the diaper which he is still wearing: the narrative's central horror is bound up with the communicative failure of the child's wordless sounds, the fact that the boiling water has been 'burning their baby boy all this time while he screamed for them to help and they hadn't' (*O*, p. 116). These wordless screams can be read as an inverted mirror-image of *Brief Interviews*' points of silence, figuring as they do as another kind of speechlessness: a sound which is wholly meaningless, which seems fundamentally *separate*, both from its point of origin and, more generally, from the entire sphere of human communication.

This sense of these wordless sounds establishing a 'separation' between sound and person is reiterated and expanded upon in the story's final lines:

[. . .] but by then it was too late, when it wouldn't stop and they couldn't make it the child had learned to leave himself and watch the whole rest unfold from a point overhead, and whatever was lost never thenceforth mattered, and the child's body expanded and walked about and drew pay and lived its life untenanted, a thing among things, its self's soul so much vapour aloft, falling as rain and then rising, the sun up and down like a yoyo. (*O*, p. 116)

Here, we are confronted with an abrupt shift, a striking movement beyond the 'realistic' parameters of the preceding story. Olsen has commented on the power of this 'fast narratological swerve', a strategy which, he argues, 'forces the reader to reboot his or her reading strategies'.<sup>70</sup> Olsen's reading usefully illustrates the ambiguity carried within Wallace's mid-sentence shift: his suggestion that 'the toddler dies, or most likely dies', while apparently reasonable, misses the strange specificity of the final sentence. Looking closely at these final

<sup>70</sup> Lance Olsen, 'Beautiful *Oblivion*: Eighteen Notes', *Quarterly Conversation*, 6 June 2011, n.p., para. 12 <<http://quarterlyconversation.com/oblivion-david-foster-wallace>> [accessed 2 August 2019].

lines, we can see how the child's learning to 'leave himself' is framed not as a death but rather another instance of separation: we learn that, having been divided from his 'self's soul', the child's body 'expanded and walked about and drew pay and lived its life untenanted, a thing among things'. After spending the narrative teasing out a singularly brief, traumatic moment, this phrase sees Wallace suddenly gesturing years into the future, offering a compressed vision of an entire life—of 'expanding', 'walking about' and 'drawing pay'—as experienced by a body which is 'untenanted', detached from a soul which, like the wordless sounds of the child's earlier screams, has become untethered from its place of origin. In this brief, partially buried vision of an 'untenanted' self, Wallace presents us with something like an embodied version of the spaces and absences which we have traced through *Brief Interviews* and into *Oblivion*. In his 'hollowed out' state—a state of 'oblivion' seemingly outside the limits of language—the child in 'Incarnations' offers us an uncanny vision of a personified 'blank space', a human-shaped breach in the fabric of Wallace's text.

As with the figure of silence in *Brief Interviews*, it is possible to trace this notion of the empty, vacated, or untethered self back through almost all of Wallace's fictional work: from the narrator's attempts to evoke the experience of being on antidepressants via the metaphorical lens of 'living on another planet' or 'being far away' from one's self in 'The Planet Trillaphon',<sup>71</sup> to the ghostly James Incandenza's posthumous fear that his son Hal has become a 'figurant'—an unspeaking extra or 'surreally mute' background presence within the 'drama' of his own life—in *Jest*.<sup>72</sup> In the arresting separation of body and self which takes place in the final lines of 'Incarnations', we again find Wallace both taking up a recurring, persistent concern and also bringing it into focus, positioning this unsettling notion of the 'untenanted' at the centre of this story and, arguably, of the other texts in the collection. Looking across *Oblivion*, we are faced with further instances of this embodied 'hollowness': as for, example, in the disturbingly blank presence at the centre of 'The Soul is Not A Smithy'. 'The Soul' is presented a first-person recollection of another traumatic childhood event: in this case a '*hostage circumstance*' which takes place in the unnamed narrator's '4th grade Civics class' (*O*, p. 67). Like the majority of *Oblivion*'s texts, 'The Soul's' narrative structure is complexly nested, a complexity here bound up with the narrator's self-acknowledged detachment from—and thus potential

<sup>71</sup> Wallace, 'Planet Trillaphon', p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, pp. 835, 837.

unreliability in remembering—its central traumatic drama:

I am someone who has always possessed good peripheral vision, and for much of Mr. Johnson's three weeks on the U.S. Constitution, I had primarily attended Civics in body only, my real attention directed peripherally at the fields and street outside [. . .] (*O*, p. 71)

In the narrator's self-imposed detachment—his self-confessedly 'peripheral' status—Wallace immediately presents us with a separation between body and consciousness. Having partially absented himself from his bodily surroundings, the narrator retreats into the active construction of 'whole linear, discretely organised narrative fantasies' (*O*, p. 71), fantasies which take the shape of an elaborate, extended sub-narrative following a young girl ('Ruth Simmons') and her dog ('Cuffie'). As 'The Soul' progresses, this story-within-the-story gradually becomes more violent and disturbing, a progression which mirrors the developing—and allegedly unnoticed—hostage situation in the 'real world' of the classroom. In this mirroring of fiction and truth, Wallace suggests the inherent limitations of the narrator's self-imposed 'absence': even as he attempts to untether himself from his surroundings, the speaker remains stubbornly attached to, and confined within, his bodily existence.

In his analysis of 'The Soul', Carlisle notes that the story's title alludes to the penultimate sentence of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which the novel's protagonist Stephen Dedalus writes in his journal that he is preparing to 'encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race'.<sup>73</sup> For Carlisle, Wallace's title, and his story as a whole, can be read as a refutation of Dedalus's smithy metaphor:

Wallace's title suggests that a smithy is not an accurate metaphor for the soul, given that we cannot control—and sometimes are not even consciously aware of—the way our experiences shape our personalities.<sup>74</sup>

In Carlisle's reading, this idea is seen to apply primarily to the story's narrator, whose partially-conscious reminiscence of the 'hostage circumstance' belies its larger traumatic influence on his later life. I would argue, however, that the notion of an unmanageable or uncontrollable soul is evidenced more strikingly and comprehensively elsewhere in the story. This sense of a self fundamentally removed from conscious intent is seen most strikingly in the story's second,

<sup>73</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Seamus Deane (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 276.

<sup>74</sup> Greg Carlisle, *Nature's Nightmare: Analyzing David Foster Wallace's Oblivion* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2013), Amazon Kindle eBook, Location 371.

more radical example of the ‘untenanted’—the substitute Civics teacher Mr Johnson, who seems (as the narrator only belated realises) to have undergone a kind of evacuation of self or consciousness mid-way through the lesson:

The only sound [. . .] being that of Richard A. Johnson writing on the chalkboard, ostensibly about the XIIIth Amendment’s abolition of Negro slavery, except instead it turned out that he was really writing *KILL THEM KILL THEM ALL* over and over again on the chalkboard [. . .] the handwriting less and less like the sub’s customary fluid script and more and more frightening and ultimately not even human looking, and not seeming to realize what he was doing or stopping to give any kind of explanation but only cocking his already oddly cocked head further and further over to the side, like somebody struggling might and main against some terrible type of evil or alien force that had ahold of him at the chalkboard and was compelling his hand to write things against his will, and making [. . .] a strange, highpitched vocal noise that was something like a scream or moan of effort, except that it was evidently just one note or pitch maintained throughout [. . .] (*O*, p. 91)

In contrast with the narrator’s partial, self-imposed state of imaginative ‘detachment’, Mr Johnson seems wholly (and disturbingly) ‘hollowed out’, emptied of self or personhood, engaged in actions beyond his control or intentions. As in ‘Incarnations’, this state of absence is again associated with a wordless, non-communicative vocalisation: the ‘strange, highpitched vocal noise’ which, in its weirdly sustained, unchanging pitch, seems outside the realm of human affect or communication. Here, however, this ‘hollowness’ is figured in terms far more pronouncedly unsettling and uncanny: even beyond its violent content, Mr Johnson’s ‘message’ becomes increasingly disturbing in the extent to which his handwriting deviates from his ‘customary fluid script’, eventually appearing ‘not even human’.

This example of embodied ‘hollowness’ is joined—and complicated—by a concurrent implication that Mr Johnson has been possessed by something inhuman: the narrator describes Johnson as appearing to struggle against ‘some terrible type of evil or alien force’, while later in the story his face is described as ‘looking simultaneously electrocuted and demonically possessed’ (*O*, p. 101). This vague suggestion of demonic or supernatural possession is brought into sharper focus when we consider how this passage serves an echo of Wallace’s earlier work. Indeed, Johnson’s ‘*KILL THEM ALL KILL THEM ALL*’ recalls the passage in *Jest* where Gately, being visited by the ‘wraith’ of the deceased James Incandenza, has his consciousness invaded by a series of unbidden words:

[. . .] in Gately’s own brain-voice but with roaring and unwilling force, comes the term *PIROUETTE*, in caps, which term Gately knows for a fact he doesn’t

have any idea what it means and no reason to be thinking it with roaring force, so the sensation is not only creepy but somehow violating, a sort of lexical rape.<sup>75</sup>

In *Jest* these ‘ghostwords’, imposed on Gately by Incandenza’s wraith, are presented as a kind of linguistic possession, a violent supernatural intrusion on, and resultant loss of control of, one’s own language and consciousness.<sup>76</sup> Returning to ‘The Soul’, we can see how Johnson’s ‘*KILL THEM ALL*’—rendered in the same capitalised, italicised script as Incandenza’s ghostwords—gesture towards a comparable, if more explicitly malevolent, ghostly possession.<sup>77</sup> Crucially, however, this passage is distinct from *Jest* in the absence of any visible or apparent ‘ghost’ or ‘wraith’. In his ‘untenanted’ state, Mr Johnson seems possessed not with a ghostly presence but rather with a disturbing (and seemingly malign) *absence*, a blankness which is terrifying precisely in its resistance to articulation (the narrator notes at one point that ‘Mr. Johnson’s face’s character and expression were indescribable’ (*O*, p. 100)). In this way, Johnson joins the burned child of ‘Incarnations’ as a further example of embodied ‘hollowness’, an unknowable—and here inescapably ‘terrible’—point of speechless oblivion at the heart of the narrative.

This suggestion of the ‘terrible’, unsettling or uncanny quality of the untenanted self resurfaces in ‘The Suffering Channel’. The long story’s primary plot follows Skip Atwater, a journalist at the fictional New York-based lifestyle magazine *Style*, in his attempts to interview Brint Moltke, a midwestern artist whose ‘work’ consists of ‘shit shaped into various likenesses or miniatures’ (*O*, p. 238), ‘artworks’ which demand particular (and grim) fascination in the fact that they ‘come out that way. Already fully formed’ (*O*, p. 239). Throughout the story, Atwater himself is associated with (or threatened by) questions of bodily absence or unconsciousness: from the start, he is characterised by ‘several lacunae or blind spots in [his] self concept’ (*O*, p. 243), including an involuntary habit of making a ‘waist level fist and mov[ing] it up and down in time to his stressed syllables’ (*O*, p. 239). Later, meanwhile, Atwater is troubled by

[. . .] the queer sense that he was in fact not a body that occupied space but rather just a bodyshaped area of space itself, impenetrable but empty, with a certain vacuous roaring sensation we tend to associate with empty space.

(*O*, p. 313)

In this evocative image of a ‘bodyshaped area of space’—as well as the uneasy suggestion that

<sup>75</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 832.

<sup>76</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, p. 884.

<sup>77</sup> The motif of ghostly possession in Wallace’s work, and the connections between this motif and questions of literary influence, have been explored further by Hering (see *Fiction and Form*, chapter 1).

there are aspects of his personality outside the control of his conscious mind—Atwater seems troubled by the possibility of the very untenanted ‘hollowness’ which we have identified in characters across *Oblivion*. As in ‘The Soul is Not a Smithy’, however, the protagonist’s partial feelings of ‘emptiness’ are reflected, and more fully manifested, elsewhere in the text: namely in the comparatively peripheral figure of the defecatory ‘artist’ Brint Moltke.

Atwater’s initial interview with Moltke (as organised, and largely directed, by the artist’s wife Amber) is informed by an intuition that ‘something was off about the artist and/or the marriage’s dynamics’:

Brint Moltke sat hunched or slumped with his toes in and his hands in his lap, a posture reminiscent of a scolded child, but at the same time smiling at Atwater. As in smiling the entire time. It was not an empty professional corporate smile, but the soul effects were similar. [. . .] A further idiosyncrasy that Atwater noted in Gregg shorthand was the arrangement of the artist’s hands: their thumbs and forefingers formed a perfect lap level circle, which Moltke held or rather somehow directed before him like an aperture or target. He appeared to be unaware of this habit. It was a gesture both unsubtle and somewhat obscure in terms of what it signified. Combined with the rigid smile, it was almost the stuff of nightmares. (*O*, p. 248)

In his nightmarishly fixed, ‘empty’, and affectless smile, Moltke offers a further unsettling iteration of the untenanted self, another character who has been emptied out, evacuated of content or consciousness. As ‘The Suffering Channel’ progresses, Moltke’s ‘blankness’ only becomes more pronounced: through all of Atwater’s interviews the artist is almost always either spoken for, or otherwise carefully directed by, his wife (to the extent that the final interview is conducted without Brint’s presence altogether). Moltke’s essential absence is crystallised most clearly, however, in his obscurely significant ‘lap level circle’, a ‘habit’ which offers an uneasy mirror image of Atwater’s own ‘waist level’ hand gesture. Over the course of the story, Atwater returns obsessively to the question of the meaning behind this apparently unconscious tic:

No analogy for the digital waist level circle or aperture or lens or target or orifice or void seemed quite right, but it struck Atwater as definitely the sort of tic or gesture that meant something—the way in dreams and certain kinds of art things were never merely things but always seemed to stand for something else that you couldn’t quite put a finger on—and the journalist had already shorthanded several reminders to himself to consider whether the gesture was some kind of unconscious visible code [. . .] (*O*, p. 253)

In its resistance to explication, its nagging suggestion of a coded significance which Atwater and we as readers can never ‘quite put a finger on’, Moltke’s empty ‘circle or aperture’ stands, like Moltke himself, as a ‘void’, an absence at the heart of the narrative. As in ‘The Soul’, this blankness seems to point towards a ‘truth’ which is undeniably nightmarish, disturbing, or

unspeakable—a suggestion later supported by the artist's final, obscure communication with Atwater: a 'cri de coeur' ('*HELP ME*') (*O*, p. 314), rendered in the medium of Moltke's distinctive 'artwork', which appears on Atwater's motel balcony in the story's closing pages. We can see how Moltke offers a further example of a personified 'hollow', a 'bodyshaped area of space' within Wallace's text. Like both the burned child in 'Incarnations' and the hauntingly absent Mr Johnson in 'The Soul', Moltke seems to present us with an embodied breach in the fabric of the narrative: in these characters, we find Wallace pointing us towards something unspeakable, a point of incompleteness and unfinished-ness at the heart of his own work.

While *Oblivion*'s 'untenanted' characters seem to occupy a territory comparable to the formal breaks found throughout *Brief Interviews*—making us aware of the silent, indeterminate spaces present in any literary text—they also invoke, in the frequently uncanny and unsettling quality of their inexpressibility, a more unknowable blankness. The 'silence' embodied by these characters frequently seems to exceed the limits of, for example, the defined and structured 'blanks and negations' which Iser identifies in the literary work.<sup>78</sup> These points of disquieting blankness gesture towards a larger absence, closer to Iser's conception of 'negativity'. Within his otherwise structured conception of the literary work's 'hollow form', Iser positions negativity as a radically unknowable space, the 'unformulated background' of everything which is *not* expressed in the printed text:

As far as literary texts are concerned, negativity is the structure underlying the invalidation of the manifested reality. It is the unformulated constituent of the text. As far as the reception of the text is concerned, negativity is that which has not yet been comprehended.<sup>79</sup>

In this notion of an unknowable, but still crucially present, *non-text*, Iser brings us back to Wittgenstein's argument for the inescapable importance of that which is '*not* written'. At the conclusion of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein's own codified, structured model of the world opens out on to the fundamental silence of all that we 'cannot speak'; in attempting to 'draw a limit to thought', he is forced to recognise the presence of the 'inexpressible', of the unspeakable and unthinkable negative space which he refers to as the 'mystical'.<sup>80</sup> It is perhaps this deeper oblivion, this radically unformulated silence, which is evoked by Wallace in the untenanted, embodied absences of this collection.

---

<sup>78</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 225.

<sup>79</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, pp. 226, 229.

<sup>80</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 7, 'Preface', 6.522.

This suggestion of a more fundamentally unknowable silence can perhaps also be seen to invoke the ‘space’ which Blanchot finds at the centre of the literary work. For Blanchot, literature occupies a ‘space’ which is necessarily negative, defined by absence and silence: the writer of literature ‘belongs to a language which no one speaks, which is addressed to no one, which has no centre, and which reveals nothing’.<sup>81</sup> In Blanchot’s terms, literature is by definition separate from the communicatory language of everyday life; the literary work consists instead of a language which does not denote or refer to anything outside itself, a language

whose whole force lies in its not being, whose very glory is to evoke, in its own absence, the absence of everything. This language of the unreal, this fictive language which delivers us to fiction, comes from silence and returns to silence.<sup>82</sup>

Blanchot’s silence goes beyond both the organised points of ‘indeterminacy’ and the foundational ‘negativity’ identified by Iser: rather, we are confronted with a deeper absence, a negative ‘space’ out of which the literary work emerges, and into which it inevitably disappears. It is this space which, for Blanchot, gives literature its peculiar power—the paradoxical sense of a negativity which is also in some way meaningful, positive:

[ . . . ] this negation only masks the more essential fact that in language at this point everything reverts to affirmation: in this language what denies affirms. For this language speaks as absence. Wordless, it speaks already; when it ceases, it persists. It is not silent, because in this language silence speaks.<sup>83</sup>

For Blanchot, literature’s ‘space’—like the ‘mystical’, inexpressible territory which exists beyond the limits of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*—is both absent and present, meaningful and meaningless. In these terms, the literary text is, significantly, not figured as an incomplete ‘hollow form’ left for the reader to fill: the work is, Blanchot argues, ‘neither finished nor unfinished: it is. What it says is exclusively this: that it is—and nothing more. Beyond that is nothing’.<sup>84</sup>

It is perhaps this absolute silence, this negative ‘space’—a space which seems to describe both the territory occupied by literature and the absence at its centre—which we find evoked by the untenanted characters of *Oblivion*. In their uncanny, frequently disturbing emptiness, these embodied ‘breaches’ seem to expose an absence at the heart of the work, a blankness which exceeds and frustrates our attempts to ‘fill out’ the gaps in the narrative. This

---

<sup>81</sup> Blanchot, p. 26.

<sup>82</sup> Blanchot, p. 39.

<sup>83</sup> Blanchot, p. 51.

<sup>84</sup> Blanchot, p. 22.



quality has been commented upon by critics: in a review of *Oblivion*, Brian Phillips comments that the underlying ‘method’ of Wallace’s collection is ‘essentially negative, essentially concerned with what lies outside it’:

The word [‘oblivion’] descends from the Latin *to forget*, and the stories in *Oblivion* are forgetful in the full, strange sense of that word—they are full of their own vanishing; beyond the tiny point of awareness in which their characters are conscious at any given moment, they are abundant with disappearance, the way an eyelid might be if one had looked suddenly away from the sun. Something is always escaping them. Major plot points are deferred, held out of frame, or ignored altogether.<sup>85</sup>

While Phillips is ultimately critical of Wallace’s collection—he concludes that ‘for all its wild verbosity, the book, in the end, mutely gestures’—his review is nonetheless astute in its engagement with the peculiarly ‘vanishing’ quality of these stories.<sup>86</sup> Throughout *Oblivion*, we repeatedly find Wallace’s stories enacting a ‘disappearance’ which chimes with self-negating silence which Blanchot assigns to literary writing, a fundamental (and, in Wallace’s stories, often disturbing) silence felt most acutely in these scattered visions of the ‘untenanted self’.

The collection’s most significant and striking example of this ‘disappearance’, however, is found in ‘Good Old Neon’. The story—which, like ‘Octet’ is positioned at the centre of its respective collection—seems, at least initially, to cover familiar territory: we are presented with the first-person account of Neal, a man tortured by a self-conscious awareness of what he describes as an essential inauthenticity or fraudulence, a feeling that his entire life has been overwhelmingly concerned with attempting to ‘create a certain impression of me in other people’ (*O*, p. 141). Neal is a familiarly Wallacean protagonist, both in his status as an educated, middle class man with an extensive vocabulary and a history of adolescent sporting achievement (in this case American Legion Baseball), and also in his tendency towards the kind of particularly looping, hyper self-conscious thinking seen previously in characters such as the depressed person or *Jest*’s Ken Erdedy. Throughout, Neal is trapped within a recognisable narcissistic spiral of his own construction, a state of ‘vicious infinite regress’ crystallised in his conception of the ‘fraudulence paradox’: the feeling that ‘the more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside’ (*O*, p. 147).

---

<sup>85</sup> Brian Phillips, ‘The Negative Style of David Foster Wallace’, *The Hudson Review*, 57.4 (2005), 675–82 (p. 677).

<sup>86</sup> Phillips, p. 676.

As in so many of *Oblivion*'s texts, however, these familiar patterns are disrupted by the breaches, the points of slippage, which serve as the foundation of Hayes-Brady's 'skeletal narrative'. In 'Good Old Neon', these instances of rupture occur in Neal's matter-of-fact references to his own suicide:

I know this part is boring and probably boring you, but it gets a lot more interesting when I get to the part where I kill myself and discover what happens immediately after a person dies. (*O*, p. 143)

These seemingly offhand remarks—which emerge at various points within the text—rupture the fabric of the narrative, both in their abrupt revelation of its inevitable ending, and, more arrestingly, in their situating Neal's voice uneasily *outside* the world of his own story. We are confronted with another 'narratological swerve', one which forces us to reframe our understanding of the entire text, from the first line—'My *whole life* I've been a fraud' (p. 141, emphasis added)—onwards. Beyond this, Neal's apparently ghostly status offers a further separation between body and consciousness: while Neal is not blankly, inaccessibly 'untenanted' in the same way as 'The Soul's' Mr Johnson or 'The Suffering Channel's' Brint Moltke, his is nonetheless placed in a position—like the child at the conclusion of 'Incarnations'—*outside himself*, detached from his bodily existence (a position which, significantly, chimes with his recollections of his feelings in life that he is 'hollow' (*O*, p. 161), his anxiety that he might have 'no true inner self' (*O*, p. 160)).

These breaches are only more striking when we consider the extent to which, in situating Neal's narrating voice outside the limits of his earthly life—and, crucially, in offering up the promise of an account of 'what happens immediately after a person dies'—they gesture towards a space which is potentially unreachable, a description of something apparently indescribable. Throughout the story, Neal is consistently troubled by an awareness of the essential limits of his narration, the inadequacy of his language in any attempt to convey the reality of our inner lives (or deaths):

This is another paradox, that many of the most important impressions and thoughts in a person's life [. . .] have so little relation to the sort of linear, one-word-after-another-word English we all communicate with each other with that it could easily take a whole lifetime just to spell out the contents of one split-second's flash of thoughts and connections, etc.—and yet we all seem to go around trying to use English [. . .] to try to convey to other people what we're thinking and to find out what they're thinking [. . .]. What goes on inside is just too fast and huge and all interconnected for words to do more than barely sketch the outlines of at most one tiny little part of it at any given instant. (*O*, p. 150–1)

At various points in his story, Neal is forced to reckon with the constraints inherent to any narrative, the extent to which the ‘linear, one-word-after the other’ nature of language fails in its attempts at capturing or conveying the ‘fast and huge and all interconnected’ truth of internal experience. Compounding this, he further claims that these limitations only become more acutely apparent when attempting to describe the moment of death:

The internal head-speed or whatever of these ideas, memories, realizations, emotions and so on is even faster, by the way— exponentially faster, unimaginably faster—when you’re dying [. . .] so that in reality the cliché about people’s whole life flashing before their eyes as they’re dying isn’t all that far off [. . .] (p. 151)

When read alongside these self-conscious meditations on the limits of language, we can see how the story’s narrative ‘breaches’, in positioning of Neal ‘outside linear time’ (p.163), work to establish the moment of death—the point to which the narrative is ostensibly heading—as something beyond the constraints of language, chronology, or narrative (a point which Neal himself acknowledges as the ‘really central, overarching paradox’ of his own story (*O*, p. 152)).

This central, paradoxical disjunction comes to a head towards the story’s end, as we approach this apparently impossible point of describing ‘what happens immediately after a person dies’. In gesturing towards a seemingly unreachable ending, Wallace brings to mind the various instances of terminal incompleteness and unfinished-ness which we have traced across all of his fiction: from the apocalyptic ‘reunion’ of ‘Westward’, to the self-conscious narrative ‘gap’ at the close of *Jest*, to the climactic ‘epiphany’ promised—and frustrated—in ‘Adult World’. In ‘Good Old Neon’, we are confronted with what initially appears to be a further iteration of this model, a progression towards an unreachable or inexpressible point: Corey Hudson notes that the story is defined by its movement ‘toward a final conclusion or statement that it can never actually reach’.<sup>87</sup> The final pages of ‘Good Old Neon’ however, offer a striking subversion of this pattern, an ending which—having established the inaccessibility of its projected conclusion—goes on to (seemingly) *reach* this end, to approach this apparently inexpressible point head-on:

All right, now we’re coming to what I promised and led you through the whole dull synopsis of what led up to this in hopes of. Meaning what it’s like to die, what happens. Right? [. . .] It’s not what anyone thinks, for one thing. The truth is you already know what it’s like. You already know the difference between

---

<sup>87</sup> Cory M. Hudson, ‘David Foster Wallace Is Not Your Friend: The Fraudulence of Empathy in David Foster Wallace Studies and “Good Old Neon”’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59.3 (2018), 295–306 (p. 301).

the size and speed of everything that flashes through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know. [. . .] Think for a second—what if all the infinitely dense and shifting worlds of stuff inside you every moment of your life turned out now to be somehow fully open and expressible afterward, after what you think of as you has died, because what if afterward now each moment itself is an infinite sea or span or passage of time in which to express it or convey it, and you don't even need any organized English [. . .] (p. 178)

Rather than—as a reader of Wallace's work might reasonably expect—cutting off before its end, the story appears for a moment to arrive at the finish of this unfinishable narrative, offering a startling evocation of a state outside of language, time, and individual consciousness, a space in which one's inner life is 'somehow fully open and expressible', where 'each moment itself is an infinite sea or span or passage of time'. In attempting to describe this indescribable point, Wallace seems (if admittedly only fleetingly) to reach the state of conclusion and completion which so many of his narratives have rejected. In her discussion of Wallace's 'resistance to endings', Hayes-Brady has argued that, within Wallace's fiction, '[c]losure is repeatedly imagined as a kind of death, death as a kind of perfection'.<sup>88</sup> At the end of 'Good Old Neon', however, we find Wallace apparently embracing this static point of 'consummation': offering us both a description of the death which forms the narrative promised terminus, and pointing us towards a paradoxically impossible narrative space which exists *beyond* this point of completion.<sup>89</sup>

It is only when we move beyond this 'ending', however, that we become wholly aware of the flaws in the foundation of Wallace's 'ending', as this ostensible finality gives way to another, perhaps more fundamental, incompleteness. Looking more closely at Neal's final monologue, we can see how these inevitable limits are made clear even within his rapturous posthumous vision: his attempts to evoke a point 'outside time' for example, are immediately qualified by competing reminders that 'we don't have much time' (*O*, p. 178), that we are unavoidably bound by the chronological limits of narrative and of language. These scattered cracks and contradictions are brought to the fore, however, in the narrative's final 'twist', its abrupt mid-sentence turn away from Neal and towards 'David Wallace',

---

<sup>88</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> It is not insignificant that Neal's actual description of the moment of his death—the 'split-second of impact when the speeding car's front bumper's just starting to touch the abutment' (*O*, p. 179n)—is relegated to the story's only footnote, a footnote which, while offering the promised 'ending' of the story (self-consciously signalled by the capitalised words 'THE END' (*O*, p. 179n)), also fragments the text, seemingly 'opening out' the primary narrative, allowing Neal to 'go beyond' this inescapable concluding event.

idly scanning class photos from his 1980 Aurora West H.S. yearbook and seeing my photo and trying, through the tiny little keyhole of himself, to imagine what all must have happened to lead up to my death in the fiery single-car accident he'd read about in 1991 [. . .] (*O*, pp. 180–1)

This metafictional shift most immediately recalls 'Octet's' 'Pop Quiz 9', offering as it does another invitation to inhabit the consciousness of the 'fiction writer'—a writer here, significantly, identified as a version of 'Wallace' himself—to step *behind* the conditional 'reality' established by Neal's narrative and consider the author in their attempts to construct the text we are reading. As with 'Octet', this turn has been widely read as a further example of Wallace's efforts to surpass the inevitable constraints of fictional narrative, to break through the 'tiny little keyhole of himself' and 'communicate' sincerely with the reader: Boswell, for example, suggests that 'by casting Neal's monologue as "David Wallace's" projection, Wallace both invites and dares his readers to read Neal's story as thinly disguised autobiography',<sup>90</sup> while Konstantinou cites the story as a further iteration of Wallace's 'metafictional validation of the real', going on to argue that '[t]he purpose of this revelation seems to be to cause the reader to experience a form of connection with Wallace as a writer — again, [. . .] not "Dave Wallace" the character, but the author'.<sup>91</sup>

Here, as in 'Octet's' final Pop Quiz, however, this self-conscious positioning of 'Wallace' within the text serves not as a means of author-reader 'communication' or 'connection', but rather as a revelation of a deeper layer of incompleteness, an inescapable unfinished-ness at the heart of Neal's seemingly 'finished' narrative. In 'Good Old Neon's' closing moments, 'David Wallace' is led to recognise the limitations of his writerly project:

[. . .] in other words David Wallace trying, if only in the second his lids are down, to somehow reconcile what this luminous guy had seemed like from the outside with whatever on the interior must have driven him to kill himself in such a dramatic and doubtlessly painful way—with David Wallace also fully aware that the cliché that you can't ever truly know what's going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid and yet at the same time trying very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt or sending the whole line of thought into the sort of inbred spiral that keeps you from ever getting anywhere [. . .] the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him commanding that other part to be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, 'Not another word'. (p. 181)

<sup>90</sup> Boswell, 'Nightmare of Consciousness', p. 157.

<sup>91</sup> Konstantinou, 'No Bull', p. 97. As with 'Octet', this suggestion that the story offers us access to the 'real' David Foster Wallace has been questioned by other critics—Hudson, for example, offers a strong critique of this critical tendency to 'take the "Wallace" as character for a bona fide surrogate of David Foster Wallace' (Hudson, p. 298), while Hering reminds us that none of Wallace's fictionalised personae should be 'taken as exactly commensurate with the author himself' (Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 38).

The fictional ‘Wallace’'s attempts to ‘reconcile’ the confident outer appearance of Neal with his presumably troubled inner life are doomed to failure, bound by the ‘hoary and insipid’, but nonetheless unavoidable, truth that ‘you can’t ever truly know what’s going on inside somebody else’. ‘Good Old Neon’'s concluding metafictional reversal is finally most striking in its reflexive insistence on the limitations of any attempt to understand or animate the consciousness of another person, the inadequacy of any imaginative effort to convey the ‘reality’ of lived experience within the confines of language. By casting Neal’s entire story—up to and including his apparently impossible movement outside the bounds of consciousness, language, and time—as the flawed, ‘fraudulent’ imagining of ‘David Wallace’, ‘Good Old Neon’ reveals an absence at its own centre, a ‘blank’ which arguably serves as the most significant ‘hollow place’ of the entire collection. While Neal may not offer the uncanny blankness of the collection’s other ‘untenanted’ characters, he nonetheless stands as *Oblivion*’s central ‘silent space’, a character who—we only belatedly realise—is entirely inaccessible to us, whose entire monologue is revealed as fundamentally ‘fraudulent’, a mass of language organised around a central, inviolable silence.

This is an absence arguably present at the heart not only of Wallace’s story, but of all fictional narrative: Carlisle rightly observes that the charge of ‘fraudulence’ against Neal could be ‘lodged against any character written by any author’, reading the story as a whole as a celebration of ‘the necessarily fraudulent art of fiction’.<sup>92</sup> Wallace’s final ‘twist’ can be seen to enact the kind of ‘disappearance’ which Blanchot finds at the centre of literature, to self-consciously dramatise the extent to which fictional language ‘comes from silence and returns to silence’.<sup>93</sup> In this, Wallace offers an incompleteness more fundamental than either the formal gaps of *Brief Interviews* or the unfinished narratives which mark so much of his writing, a negativity which serves as the very foundation of the literary work. Like Blanchot, however, Wallace’s story is simultaneously concerned with the paradoxical power of this literary ‘silence’, the extent to which, within this space of negativity, ‘everything reverts to affirmation’.<sup>94</sup> Even as it exposes the hollow ‘fraudulence’ of its own narrative, ‘Good Old Neon’ also stands as a testament to the uncanny impact of this incompleteness, the ‘mystical’ quality of a fiction which, although built on an inevitable hollowness, still succeeds in giving fleeting, ghostly life to this

---

<sup>92</sup> Carlisle, *Nature’s Nightmare*, Location 1097.

<sup>93</sup> Blanchot, p. 39.

<sup>94</sup> Blanchot, p. 51.

unknowable consciousness, this impossible description of a point beyond language, time, or death. The story's final lines see 'David Wallace' confronting a nagging internal voice which reminds him of the innate failure of his literary project: a voice which, he feels, will only lead him into 'the sort of inbent spiral that keeps you from ever getting anywhere'. Countering this voice however, is a conflicting presence—the 'realer, more enduring and sentimental part' of 'Wallace'—which 'command[s] that other part to be silent', ending the story with the final, definitive injunction: 'Not another word'. This concluding return to silence stands as an almost direct echo of the final proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* ('Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent').<sup>95</sup> Like Wittgenstein, Wallace finishes with a gesture towards an unspeakable absence, a 'mystical' negative space at the centre of all literary work.

### Coda

While, as this chapter has explored, Wallace's continued, career-length engagement with questions of incompleteness is clearly evident in the stories of *Brief Interviews* and *Oblivion*, these two collections are also arguably marked by a very different kind of unfinished-ness, one which we have yet to address in our analysis, but which perhaps offers us an alternative perspective from which to approach this recurring concern. This aspect of incompleteness is one which only becomes evident if we briefly consider these two collections in the context of their composition, and specifically in relation to the parallel composition of Wallace's final, unfinished novel *The Pale King*. In his biography of Wallace, Max writes that, on completing *Jest*, Wallace almost immediately began—or, at least, intended to begin—work on a new novel:

[ . . . ] by 1995 he had been hoping—expecting—to start something else. It was his assumption that the new thing would be a novel too. The novel was the big form, the one that mattered, that reviewers and other authors cared about and by which he could fulfil his compact with readers.<sup>96</sup>

Hering, meanwhile, confirms that Wallace's work on his next novel began around this point, noting, for example, that by 1997 (two years before the publication of *Brief Interviews*) Wallace had already 'typed an early outline for a long work titled *Sir John Feelgood or, The Genesis of a Great Lover*'.<sup>97</sup> While this early outline—featuring a plot centred around virtual-reality pornography—bears little resemblance to the final version of *TPK*, it is nevertheless possible to

---

<sup>95</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 7.

<sup>96</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 234.

<sup>97</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 110.

trace a continuous line between these early attempts and the (still-incomplete) version of the novel assembled by Pietsch after Wallace's suicide.

In light of this aspect of compositional overlap, it is easy to see why critics have attempted to make sense of the inevitably complex relationship between *Brief Interviews*, *Oblivion*, and *TPK*: Max, for example, suggests that both story collections emerge (at least to some degree) as side-projects, interruptions from, or even abandoned fragments of, this larger project.<sup>98</sup> Burn, meanwhile, characterises the various texts as 'a series of parallel compositions enlivened by creative cross-fertilization'.<sup>99</sup> The most comprehensive account, however, is provided by Hering, who persuasively argues that the entirety of Wallace's post-*Infinite Jest* work can be understood in terms of 'one huge linear "discrete project" that shed or engendered other projects during its process'.<sup>100</sup> Hering asserts that 'a significant number of the post-1996 fictions [. . .] come into existence *because* Wallace is trying to write his third novel', employing archival sources to detail how, for example, much of the material initially planned for *Sir John Feelgood*—including its central focus on 'sex, relationships and visual perception'—was 'sloughed off' into the stories of *Brief Interviews*.<sup>101</sup> This aspect of 'cross-pollination' only becomes more pertinent in the case of *Oblivion*, a collection which developed 'in tandem with elements of *The Pale King*', to the extent that a number of its stories (including 'Mister Squishy', 'Incarnations of Burned Children', and 'The Soul is Not a Smithy') were initially earmarked as sections from *TPK*, 'components of that larger work that have been hived off and polished into stand-alone pieces'.<sup>102</sup>

When approaching either *Brief Interviews* or *Oblivion* with this compositional context in mind, we are confronted with a wholly different form of unfinished-ness, a further series of textual 'breaches' and frayed edges which seem to betray the genesis of these stories as abortive fragments of Wallace's larger work-in-progress. These 'fissures' are most visible in 'The Soul is Not a Smithy': a text initially conceived of as part of *TPK*, and which, according to Hering, he had been 'working on for seven years'.<sup>103</sup> When read alongside *TPK*, it is difficult not to be

---

<sup>98</sup> See Max, *Every Love Story*.

<sup>99</sup> Burn, "'A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness": *The Pale King*', in *Long Thing*, pp. 149–168 (p. 166, n. 4).

<sup>100</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 126.

<sup>101</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, pp. 126, 129–30.

<sup>102</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, pp. 115, 117.

<sup>103</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 135.



struck by the still-visible points of connection between the two texts: from the strong echoes of subject matter and ideas (the narrator's description of the crushing weight of administrative boredom associated with his father's job, for example, clearly anticipates the central thematic concerns of the later novel), to the apparent plot-level connections (the story's references to *The Exorcist* seem to connect almost directly with a parallel allusion in §32 of *TPK*). We find similar examples of these broken connections' elsewhere: whether in the reference to 'Mister Squishee' trucks in §47 of *TPK*, or in the buried suggestion that *Oblivion*'s stories of traumatic childhood might have originated as backstories for *TPK*'s characters (according to Max, for example, the story of the burned child in 'Incarnations' was originally intended as an origin for *TPK*'s Shane Drinion).<sup>104</sup> In teasing out these scattered points of compositional 'breakage', we can see how *Brief Interviews* and (especially) *Oblivion* are imbued with a further layer of incompleteness, with points of unfinished-ness which exceed—and, with this inescapably complicate—our reading of the persistent incompleteness of Wallace's work.

How, then, does the compositional context of these stories affect our reading of these two collections? Should these archival 'fissures'—these points of actual unfinished-ness—be regarded as wholly separate from more deliberate formal and thematic and thematic incompleteness which we have traced across Wallace's fiction, or might they be connected or related in some way? Undoubtedly, we are confronted with an inevitable conflict, a tension between two, apparently very different, modes of incompleteness. The question which arises is whether this tension might be in some way productive: whether the stark, very real incompleteness of both these stories and *TPK* might offer us a different perspective on the deliberate incompleteness of Wallace's fiction, or, conversely, whether, in the persistent deliberate incompleteness of his fiction, Wallace might provoke a reading which can more productively approach the actual unfinished-ness of his final work.

---

<sup>104</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 215.

## 5. Unfinished Reading: *The Pale King*

### Approaching *The Pale King*

How can one responsibly comment on an unfinished novel, posthumously published, pieced together by an editor from materials retrieved from the author's workroom? Anything one ventures to say about the lost whole that *would* have been *The Pale King* will inevitably be speculative. Where does one even begin?<sup>1</sup>

In many respects, these questions, as articulated by Brian McHale, can be seen to underline any attempt to read Wallace's final novel. *The Pale King*, left incomplete at the time of Wallace's suicide in 2008, and—following the organisation and assembly of his notes and drafts by Pietsch—published as 'An Unfinished Novel' in 2011, presents readers with a set of interpretative problems unique within Wallace body of fiction.<sup>2</sup> In its unfinished state, the novel seems, as McHale notes, to demand a 'speculative' reading, one which takes account of the unavoidable gap between the 'lost whole' of Wallace's intentions and the fragmentary reality of the published text. Since its publication, critics have addressed the challenges posed by *TPK*'s incompleteness: in an early review, Burn described the novel as 'throw[ing] out characters and plot lines, narrative arcs that are forever doomed to hang suspended in textual space'.<sup>3</sup> It is this state of 'suspension' which so acutely distinguishes *TPK* from Wallace's previous texts, and which makes the work of reading the novel so problematic: Burn notes how *TPK*'s posthumous status 'makes visible the wormhole between the writer's incomplete intentions and the editor's hand', and we can see how this 'wormhole' serves as an unavoidable obstacle for critical readings, destabilising any attempt to offer a 'complete' analysis of the text.<sup>4</sup> McHale's essay goes on to compare *TPK* to *Gravity's Rainbow* in an effort to 'fill in some of the gaps and bridge over some of the disconnections that are consequences of the text's incompleteness', offering a speculative account of 'the ultimate shape that *The Pale King* might have been moving toward'.<sup>5</sup> While convincing in many respects, McHale's attempt to 'fill in' *TPK*'s incompleteness finally constrains the text within a single (inevitably limited) critical perspective, an account which—in placing primary focus on an imagined version of the novel's 'ultimate

---

<sup>1</sup> Brian McHale, 'The Pale King, Or, The White Visitation', in *Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, pp. 191–210 (p. 191).

<sup>2</sup> Wallace, *The Pale King*. Further references to *TPK* in this chapter will be placed in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Burn, 'The Machine in the Ghost', *American Book Review*, 32.5 (2011), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Burn, 'The Machine in the Ghost', p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> McHale, p. 202.

shape’—risks eliding the particular fragmentary form of the published document. In McHale’s reading—as in many other critical responses—we are forced to confront the problems involved in any attempt to imaginatively ‘finish’ *TPK*, the extent to which any interpretation of the text as a coherent ‘whole’ will itself be incomplete.

How, then, are we to respond to the radical unfinished-ness of *TPK*? One productive mode of enquiry can be found in the model of ‘genetic criticism’. In focusing ‘not on “finished” texts but rather on the development of a text as it changes from one manuscript to another’, critics such as Groenland, Staes, and Hering have approached *TPK* as a ‘work in process’, a text which can be understood only in the context of the larger body of notes and drafts held in Wallace’s archive.<sup>6</sup> Staes, for example, suggests that Wallace’s notes and drafts offer a ‘glimpse of the artist in the process of creation’, thus answering ‘a number of questions that a finished text can only hint at’.<sup>7</sup> Groenland, meanwhile, argues that *TPK*’s unfinished status makes it uniquely suited to genetic analysis: as an ‘open work’—consisting of both ‘relatively polished drafts’ and ‘earlier and rawer material’—the novel self-consciously encodes within it the ‘interplay between completion and incompletion’ which serves as the foundation of genetic critical enquiry.<sup>8</sup> The most comprehensive genetic reading thus far, however, is offered by Hering, who employs an examination of ‘all extant archive-based documentation and draft material pertaining to Wallace’s fiction in the period 1997–2007’ in the construction of a ‘detailed genetic history of the novel’s composition’, tracing the progress of *TPK* from its inception to its abandonment.<sup>9</sup> Hering’s reading—alongside Groenland’s and Staes’s—is invaluable in establishing something approaching an empirical view of the ‘complete’ (and, in this, fundamentally fragmentary) shape of *TPK*’s text(s), a ‘map’ of Wallace’s late fiction which obviates the need for the kind of imaginative guesswork of ‘filling in’ found in earlier critical responses to the novel.<sup>10</sup>

While this chapter builds on the work done by these critics—and follows them in recognising the unstable nature of *TPK*’s text—it also significantly departs from them, shifting the locus of enquiry away from an ‘objective’ treatment of Wallace’s authorial processes to

---

<sup>6</sup> See Groenland, ‘A Recipe for a Brick’, p. 365; Staes, ‘Work in Process’; Hering, *Fiction and Form*.

<sup>7</sup> Staes, ‘Work in Process’, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> Groenland, ‘A Recipe for a Brick’, pp. 366–7.

<sup>9</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 125.

<sup>10</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 12.

investigate instead the subjective experience of reading this unfinished, unfinishable novel. Taking *TPK* as a case study, I want to ask: what happens when we attempt to read, engage with, or respond to an incomplete literary text? How is our reading shaped, directed, or disrupted by the novel's self-evident unfinished-ness? And what might this 'incomplete' reading tell us about the reading process more generally? While the chapter will refer to Wallace's archive, my starting point and primary focus will be the published text of *TPK*, the self-consciously incomplete document as collated, edited, and organised by Pietsch. At the start of his analysis of *TPK*, Hering quotes Frank Kermode in addressing the extent to which Wallace's novel stands paradoxically as both a 'world of potentiality' (in the sprawling mass of compositional materials held in Wallace's archive), and a 'completed action' (in the edited construction of the published text).<sup>11</sup> Even in its self-proclaimed status as 'An Unfinished Novel', Pietsch's published *Pale King* offers us a text which has, in a certain respect, been 'completed', collected into a book with a beginning, middle, and end. By addressing this contingently 'finished' text, I want to investigate more closely the uniquely uneasy experience of approaching Wallace's unfinished novel as a reader. In this, I do not attempt to position Pietsch's construction as any kind of 'definitive' version of Wallace's novel.<sup>12</sup> Rather, by considering this version of the text (the version currently most widely available to readers), I want to address how the published *Pale King* places consistent focus on its own limitations, everywhere leading the reader to confront and negotiate the interpretative problems which arise out of its unfinished-ness.

Returning to McHale's initial questions: where *does* one begin in addressing the published *Pale King*? Even in its edited state, the novel is without a coherent 'main' narrative: we are confronted instead with a collection of 50 numbered sections, connected (albeit sometimes only barely) by their consistent focus on the US Internal Revenue Service. *TPK*'s 'plot'—to the extent that it can be said to have one—follows a disparate group of characters as they approach, and begin working at, an IRS Regional Examination Center in Peoria, Illinois, in or around 1985. Within this, Wallace (or, perhaps more accurately, Pietsch) allows room for frequent digressions, including, variously, detours into characters' troubled childhoods; an

---

<sup>11</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 138, cited in Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 124. Kermode's notion of the literary work as 'complete action' is in turn drawn from Aristotle's *Poetics*.

<sup>12</sup> The impossibility of establishing any 'definitive' version of *TPK* has been addressed in greater detail by Groenland ('A King of Shreds and Patches: Assembling Wallace's Final Novel', in *Critical Insights*, pp. 221–37).

extended monologue from a character named ‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle detailing his progress from youthful ‘wastoid’ to dedicated employee of ‘the Service’ (p. 156); a series of interjections from a voice claiming to be the novel’s ‘real author’ (p. 68); and many more fragmentary meditations on taxes, bureaucracy, information, civics, and boredom. Faced with this chaotic swirl of narrative data—in his working notes, Wallace significantly described *TPK* as having a ‘tornado feeling’—perhaps the most apposite place to begin an enquiry into the text’s unfinished-ness is the novel’s end.<sup>13</sup>

As might be expected with an unfinished work, the end of *TPK* does not offer anything close to narrative resolution. The novel’s final chapter (§50) is a brief, fragmentary piece structured as an address to a second-person ‘you’, featuring an unnamed female ‘facilitator’ (p. 539) in a windowless room, who offers her subject enigmatic instructions to ‘relax’ and ‘become aware of the body’ (p. 540). In its abstract, depersonalised characters and setting—an office which, we are told, ‘could be any office’ (p. 539)—and lack of clear connection with *TPK*’s preceding sections, the chapter offers a stark illustration of the entire novel’s final absence of coherence or closure. Indeed, with the exception of a few embryonic gestures towards an eventual showdown between ‘human examiners’ and ‘machines’ (‘Notes and Asides’, p. 547), *TPK*’s narrative threads are all left radically unfinished by the novel’s close: John Jeremiah Sullivan pertinently comments that the plot ‘never progresses. It never really seems to begin’.<sup>14</sup> In the overt disconnection and abstraction of its final pages, *TPK* forces a readerly confrontation with the novel’s incompleteness, leading us, perhaps, to conclude with Sullivan that Wallace did not get ‘anywhere near’ to his intended endpoint.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, this conclusion is problematised when we consider the novel’s incompleteness in the context of Wallace’s earlier writing. In many ways, *TPK*’s absence of narrative closure echoes the numerous instances of frustrated or denied completion which we have traced throughout Wallace’s fiction. From the unfinished final sentence of *Broom*, to the ‘broken loop’ of *Jest*, Wallace’s writing career is characterised everywhere by narratives which, like *TPK*, fail to come to a coherent or definite close. This aspect of formal or aesthetic

<sup>13</sup> Pietsch, ‘Editor’s Note’, in Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. i–xii (p. ix). All further references will be placed in parentheses in the text.

<sup>14</sup> John Jeremiah Sullivan, ‘Too Much Information’, *GQ*, May 2011 <<https://www.gq.com/story/david-foster-wallace-the-pale-king-john-jeremiah-sullivan>> [accessed 10 December 2018], para. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Sullivan, para. 25.

continuity has been addressed by Burn, who reads *TPK*'s incomplete arrangement as a continuation of the 'centrifugal' strategies of *Jest*,<sup>16</sup> and Hayes-Brady, who likewise draws a direct line of connection between the 'broken' structure of *TPK* and Wallace's earlier novels, observing that *Jest* and *Broom* were likewise

characterized by a lack of strong connections between the characters, functioning rather as collections of loosely associated 'short stories', with different narrative styles and focuses, framed within the boundaries of a novel but always bursting out of them.<sup>17</sup>

Building on this observation, Hayes-Brady goes on to suggest that we take the 'tornadic' quality of *TPK* as an organising principle applicable across all of Wallace's fiction—that the novel's chaotic narrative can be understood as only the last in a series of texts which, far from following any single coherent or 'complete' narrative thread, rather operate as fragments orbiting a 'silent, even empty, center'.<sup>18</sup> The fact that this notion of the 'tornadic' is drawn from Wallace's own notes serves to complicate our response to the novel's unfinished-ness: to what extent, for example, can we read *TPK*'s 'incomplete' structure as a deliberate strategy on Wallace's part? Significantly, Wallace's notes also establish a plan to 'plot a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens' (p. 548), while elsewhere describing specific instances where 'something big *threatens* to happen but doesn't actually happen' (p. 546). In many respects, these (extra)textual signposts seem to give us license to read *TPK*'s structural unfinished-ness as a further iteration of Wallace's career-length exploration of incompleteness: Hayes-Brady concludes that 'the resistance to conventional narrative structure appears to be as present in *TPK* as it was in the earlier novels',<sup>19</sup> while Boswell goes so far as to assert that Wallace 'knew what he wanted to say in this book, and largely said it'.<sup>20</sup> Running beneath these confident assessments of the novel's form, however, is a sense that we cannot know where to draw the line between Wallace's deliberate engagement with incompleteness and *TPK*'s inherent unfinished-ness as a posthumous work. Even in its resemblance to Wallace's earlier frustrated conclusions, the ending of *TPK*—a conclusion which we must remember was positioned as such by Pietsch, not Wallace—cannot really be considered an 'ending' at all.

<sup>16</sup> Burn, 'The Machine in the Ghost', p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 59.

<sup>19</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> Marshall Boswell, 'Preface: David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"', in *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. by Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014), pp. vi–xii (p. x).

The question of where or whether *TPK* ‘ends’ (or, indeed, begins) is further troubled when we consider the editorial apparatus which surrounds the novel in its published form. Approaching *TPK* as a reader, §50 is immediately followed by a selection of ‘Notes and Asides’ drawn from Wallace’s manuscript pages. While ostensibly separate from the ‘main text’, in practice these notes stand in an ambiguous relation to the novel as a whole, serving variously as signposts for *how* to read and interpret *TPK*, fragmentary indications of how the plot might have continued, and stark reminders of the text’s status as an arrested ‘work in progress’. To a certain extent, these materials—precariously situated at the edges of the novel—again recall the deliberate strategies of Wallace’s earlier writing: throughout his career, Wallace unsettles the boundaries of the literary text, from the overt example of *Jest*’s endnotes, to the more buried instances of playfulness found on the copyright pages of many of his works.<sup>21</sup> Across these instances, Wallace makes us aware of the unstable relation between text and paratexts—the ‘accompanying productions’ which, as defined by Gérard Genette, ‘surround’ and ‘extend’ the literary work.<sup>22</sup> In Genette’s terms, paratexts serve as a ‘threshold of interpretation’ for any literary text, occupying an ambiguous space ‘between the inside and the outside’, and in this profoundly informing our experience as readers.<sup>23</sup> In Wallace’s fiction, we are confronted with numerous instances where the line between the textual and the paratextual has been self-consciously blurred. We find a further deliberate iteration of this strategy within the ‘main’ text of *TPK*: at the start of §9 (the first ‘Author Here’ section), the ‘author’—attempting to assert the novel’s ‘really true’ status—instructs the reader to ‘flip back and look at the book’s legal disclaimer, which is on the copyright page, verso side, four leaves in from the rather unfortunate and misleading front cover’ (p. 69). Considering *TPK* as a whole, however, we can see how the additional material which surrounds the text—including Wallace’s notes, Pietsch’s ‘Editor’s Note’ and, in the paperback edition of the novel, ‘four previously unpublished scenes’ from Wallace’s papers—all serve a function which, although comparable to these earlier deliberate strategies, is also separate from them. By ‘framing’ *TPK*, these paratexts work both to establish

<sup>21</sup> Hidden within the front matter for *Girl*, for example, is an offer of thanks to ‘The Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Fund for Aimless Children’ (p. vi); similarly, the copyright page of *Brief Interviews* acknowledges the ‘generous and broad-minded support’ of, amongst others, ‘The Staff and Management of Denny’s 24-Hour Family Restaurant, Bloomington, Il.’ (p. vi).

<sup>22</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Genette, p. 2. For more on Wallace’s paratexts, see Tore Rye Andersen, ‘Judging by the Cover’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 53.3 (2012), 251–78.

the ‘edges’ of Wallace’s novel and to remind us of their radical contingency, the extent to which the borders of the unfinished work are—more so than any of Wallace’s earlier fictions—inescapably ‘porous’.

Any attempt to explore the way we read *TPK*, then, must necessarily take account of the ‘threshold’ presented by these editorial paratexts. Pietsch’s ‘Editor’s Note’, for example—situated as it is at the start of the book—establishes a series of contextual frames which shape and direct our reading even before we reach the start of Wallace’s text. One of the central effects of this introduction is its foregrounding of the book’s status as a posthumously-constructed document—and, with this, of the nature and extent of Pietsch’s own part in constructing the novel. The ‘note’ begins by offering something of an ‘origin story’ for *TPK*: an account firstly of Wallace’s protracted composition of this ‘long thing’, and then, following Wallace’s death, of Pietsch’s work of editing the ‘hundreds and hundreds of pages’ of notes and drafts into some kind of coherent or otherwise publishable form (p. viii). Certainly, Pietsch played a crucial part in the production of *TPK*—Andersen has suggested that Pietsch’s editorial choices serve a ‘significant co-authoring function’—and, in this initial note, Pietsch brings these editorial choices into self-conscious focus.<sup>24</sup> Groenland reads the ‘Editor’s Note’ as an attempt to ‘render the process of the book’s construction “transparent”’, and we see evidence of this in Pietsch’s candid discussion of his editorial intentions and processes.<sup>25</sup> While claiming at one point that ‘[t]he pages of the manuscript were edited only lightly’, Pietsch also offers concrete examples of his editorial input, including standardising character names, job titles, and other ‘factual matters’ across the work, making ‘occasional cuts for sense or pace’, and finding suitable end points for chapters that ‘trailed off unfinished’ (p. xi). Underpinning these editorial choices, Pietsch argues, was a desire to

eliminate unintentional distractions and confusions so as to allow readers to focus on the enormous issues David intended to raise, and to make the story and characters as comprehensible as possible. (p. xi)

By positioning these gestures of editorial ‘transparency’ at the start of *TPK*, Pietsch invites us to engage in a specific kind of reading of Wallace’s novel—one consistently aware that the ‘comprehensibility’ of the published text is bound up with Pietsch’s mediating editorial

---

<sup>24</sup> Andersen, ‘Pay Attention! David Foster Wallace and His Real Enemies’, *English Studies*, 95.1 (2014), 7–24 (p. 14, n. 29).

<sup>25</sup> Groenland, ‘A King of Shreds and Patches’, p. 223.



presence.

Beyond this, Pietsch's introduction also establishes a biographical frame for our reading: in setting out an 'origin story' for *TPK*, Pietsch positions the novel in the context of, firstly, Wallace's protracted compositional process (he quotes a letter in which Wallace compares the writing of *TPK* to 'wrestling sheets of balsa wood in a high wind' (p. vii)), and secondly, Wallace's suicide (the narrative of the novel's construction begins, of course, with the posthumous discovery by Wallace's agent Bonnie Nadell of a 'neat stack of manuscript, twelve chapters totalling 250 pages', arranged on a desk in the author's office (p. viii)). This contextual awareness is, perhaps, an inevitable side-effect of any readerly engagement with a posthumous work. Critics have commented on how the fact of Wallace's death (and the proliferation of biographical profiles, memorials, and memoirs which followed it) have reshaped critical and popular responses to his writing: Burn, for example, argues that 'the accumulated weight of posthumous profiles', along with the opening of Wallace's archive, has 'prompted a reformulation of the coordinates of David Foster Wallace's fiction, casting a fine autobiographical net over much that at one time seemed pure invention'.<sup>26</sup> For Burn, *TPK* stands at 'the apex of this revisionary process': he suggests that 'the all-engulfing shadow of Wallace's suicide has made *The Pale King* seem to be a site where reciprocal exchanges between novel and life are a vital phase of the reading process'.<sup>27</sup> While, as Burn suggests, Wallace's suicide casts a 'shadow' which informs any reading of *TPK*, Pietsch's paratextual introduction is striking in the extent to which it explicitly guides us toward this biographical perspective: the 'autobiographical net' is, in a sense, in place even within the confines of Wallace's book. Throughout the 'Editor's Note', Pietsch repeatedly conceives of *TPK* as offering us a direct, posthumous engagement with Wallace-the-person: he describes, for example, how, on first reading the drafts for the novel, he felt 'as if I were in [Wallace's] presence, and was able to forget awhile the awful fact of his death' (p. viii). For Pietsch, the power of *TPK* lies at least partially in its capacity to reanimate Wallace's living voice: Wallace's notes and drafts are framed as offering 'the closest thing to seeing his amazing mind at play upon the world' (p. viii), and Pietsch's organisation of these materials stands as an attempt to allow readers to 'look once more inside that extraordinary mind' (p. ix). In promising access to the 'inside' of

---

<sup>26</sup> Burn, 'The Machine in the Ghost', p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Burn, 'The Machine in the Ghost', p. 16.

Wallace's head—an image of readerly exhumation which captures the uncanny quality which accompanies any reading of a posthumous text (and perhaps again gestures, like the title of *Infinite Jest*, back towards *Hamlet*'s graveyard scene)—Pietsch models and invites a reading of *TPK* in which biography and work are impossible to disentangle, in which the 'living voice' present in the text is always haunted by the inescapable shadow, the 'awful fact', of Wallace's death.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, Pietsch's 'Editor's Note' also reinforces our awareness of *TPK*'s incomplete status. Even as he insists on its 'astonishingly full', 'gorgeously alive' (p. viii) quality, Pietsch also reminds of *TPK*'s unfinished-ness: we are informed, for example, that Wallace left no complete outline indicating its overarching structure—that, beyond 'a few broad notes about the novel's trajectory', the drafts and notes included 'no list of scenes, no designated opening or closing point, nothing that could be called a set of directions or instructions' (p. ix). In foregrounding the difficulties involved in the editorial process, Pietsch explicitly reminds us that *TPK* is 'not by any measure a finished work' (p. ix) and would undoubtedly be 'vastly different' had Wallace survived to finish it (p. xi). This sense of the text's contingent structure is further found in the novel's other editorial paratexts: in his brief introduction to the 'Notes and Asides', for example, Pietsch argues that these notes are included partially to 'allow a fuller understanding' of the novel's ideas—offering hints at 'where the plot of the novel might have headed', and 'additional information about characters' background or their future development'—but also to 'illuminate how much a work in progress the novel still was' (p. 541). In the note introducing the paperback edition's four additional 'unpublished scenes', meanwhile, Pietsch further underlines the novel's structural contingency: confronted with a series of 'complete scenes' which, although 'hilarious and entertaining and revealing', do not—according to Pietsch—'fit with the rest of the narrative' (p. 550), we are again brought face to face with the 'porous borders' of *TPK*. These 'deleted scenes'—which, like the included 'Notes and Asides', occupy a paratextual space both inside and outside the text—stand as testament to the provisional structure of the published novel, the ways in which *TPK*'s apparent points of

---

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Bennett has commented on the ways in which *TPK* both apparently invites us to view the contents of 'David Foster Wallace's head' and at the same time finally asserts 'the impossibility of knowing any such thing' (Bennett, 'Inside David Foster Wallace's Head: Attention, Loneliness, Suicide, and the Other Side of Boredom', in *Gesturing Toward Reality*, pp. 69–83 (p. 72)).

(even partial) ‘wholeness’ exist only as what Groenland has termed an ‘editorial construct’.<sup>29</sup> The novel’s editorial paratexts cumulatively establish and reinforce our understanding of *TPK* as a work which is everywhere unfinished, a text which thus demands a particular kind of reading (Groenland, in fact, argues that the novel leads us to ‘make interpretive judgments that arguably go beyond those involved in encounters with the work of a living author’, blurring the line between reader and editor).<sup>30</sup> Through this chapter, I will continue to address and engage with these paratexts, not as explanations or keys with which to ‘fill in’ the *TPK*’s unfinishedness, but rather as emblems of its incompleteness, sites in which the text’s instability is brought into uneasy focus.

Even when taking into account these supplementary editorial and archival materials, we are still left no closer to being able to answer the question of just *how* unfinished *TPK* is: whether, as Boswell suggests, Wallace ‘largely said’ what he intended to, or whether, as Sullivan contends, the novel is not ‘anywhere near’ its completed state. Pietsch addresses the difficulty of knowing ‘[h]ow much more there might have been’, concluding that—in the absence of any ‘detailed outline projecting scenes and stories yet to be written’ within the archive—this answer is ‘unknowable’ (p. x). We are left with the irresolvable tension between the notes’ vague indications of a larger plot (one which could perhaps have centred around ‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle’s ability to remember a mysterious ‘formula of numbers that permits total concentration’ (p. 543)), and the competing suggestion that Wallace only ever intended to plot ‘a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens’ (p. 548). This unanswerable question leads us to the problem at the heart of our investigation: how, in the end, can we make sense of the relationship between Wallace’s deliberate strategies of incompleteness—the strategies which we have addressed and interrogated throughout this thesis—and the inevitably more radical unfinishedness presented by *TPK*? Clearly, Wallace’s final novel presents us with two competing forms of incompleteness; bearing this in mind, we must avoid the temptation to simply treat *TPK* as a straightforward iteration of the techniques made

---

<sup>29</sup> Groenland, ‘A King of Shreds and Patches’, p. 221. These paratexts are themselves striking in what they *don’t* tell us: as Groenland notes, the origins of both the included notes and the ‘additional scenes’ are ‘not documented in any detail [. . .] no chronological or material information is presented, and we are told only that they come “from other parts of the manuscript”’ (p. 224). In constructing a version of the novel which is clearly a ‘reader’s edition rather than a scholarly one’ (pp. 222–3), Pietsch leaves scholars with the work of ‘fill[ing] in the missing information’ (p. 224): without supplementary reference to Wallace’s archives, we are offered a picture of *TPK*’s archival form which is itself incomplete.

<sup>30</sup> Groenland, ‘A King of Shreds and Patches’, p. 233.

familiar in Wallace's earlier work. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to find points of connection between these two versions of the unfinished: Groenland, for example, draws a line between the 'material history' of *TPK* and its related 'thematic interest in process and incompleteness',<sup>31</sup> while Hayes-Brady suggests that novel's incompleteness 'encodes the persistent resistance to closure that mark[s] all of Wallace's work'.<sup>32</sup> Building on these ideas—and on Burn's suggestion that Wallace's work presents us with a 'poetics of incompleteness'—I want to investigate how these aspects of connection and continuity are made manifest in the process of reading Wallace's final novel.<sup>33</sup>

In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider the ways in which *TPK* invites (or perhaps demands) a particular mode of 'incomplete reading', a reading which negotiates with, and responds to, the unfinished-ness of Wallace's work. In this enquiry, I will treat *TPK* as a lens through which we can reconsider and reframe our understanding of the various formal and thematic concerns which we have explored throughout this thesis. Burn has suggested that *TPK* can be understood as a 'kaleidoscopic text, one in which we can see the outlines of Wallace's evolving career: the echoes of the earlier books, his evolving style, and a condensed rehearsal of his theory of the novel'.<sup>34</sup> Following this notion, my investigation will trace a reversed path back through the key ideas which we identified in each of Wallace's previous works: from the sustained concern with silence and absence found in *Oblivion* and *Brief Interviews*, to the self-conscious engagement with maximalism and excess which marked *Jest*, to the anxious focus on influence and intertextuality seen throughout the stories of *Girl*, and finally to the explicitly philosophical underpinnings that characterised *Broom*. In this backwards movement, I will show how Wallace's final novel recapitulates and builds on the concerns of his previous work, and, in this, how our readings of the various forms of incompleteness present in these earlier texts might be cumulatively employed in the construction of an 'incomplete reading' of *TPK*.

### 'Some enormous, unexplained, and unmotivated blank': Silence and Absence

Approaching *TPK* in the wake of *Oblivion* and *Brief Interviews*, it is hard to ignore the aspects

<sup>31</sup> Groenland, 'A Recipe for a Brick', p. 366. Groenland also pertinently identifies the 'numerous images of incomplete or damaged structures' found throughout *TPK* (p. 371).

<sup>32</sup> Hayes-Brady, "'Palely Loitering": On Not Finishing (in) *The Pale King*, in *Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, pp. 142–55 (p. 143).

<sup>33</sup> Burn, 'Theory of Vision', p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> Burn, 'A Paradigm', p. 165.

of continuity and connection which run between these three late works.<sup>35</sup> Wallace's unfinished novel is marked by the same instances of absence, blankness, and silence which shaped his previous collections: from moments of transcribed speechlessness (in the ellipses which punctuate the unattributed discussion of masturbation in §3, for example), to recognisable 'breaks' in the fabric of the work (as in the recurrence of the *Brief Interviews*' absent-questioner format in the IRS's 'video interviews' of §14). Even in its partially-constructed state, Wallace's novel is punctuated by deliberate plot-level 'gaps', points of narrative indeterminacy left for the reader to negotiate: in his first 'authorial' address to the reader, 'David Wallace' claims that, due to a complex series of 'familio-legal strictures' (p. 80, n. 61), he is prohibited from relating how he came to work for the IRS, asserting that this is a 'background item that I can explain only obliquely, i.e., by ostensibly explaining why I can't discuss it' (p. 80). While the resulting 'anti-explanation' (p. 80, n. 16)—which offers oblique and tortured reference to 'a certain unnamed relative with unspecified connections to the Midwest Commissioner's Office of a certain unnamed government agency' (p. 81)—is positioned as an attempt to avoid 'some enormous, unexplained, and unmotivated blank' (p. 80, n. 16) in the narrative, it succeeds only in making this 'blank' manifest, drawing attention to this unsayable point at the centre of 'Wallace's' account. Looking elsewhere, meanwhile, we find this figure of textual or narrative 'blankness' again associated with specific characters in the novel, recalling the 'untenanted', hollowed-out figures of *Oblivion*. Severs has commented on how *TPK*'s characters 'see blankness in themselves or (often more horrifying) in others', and we find examples of these unsettling embodied 'blanks' throughout: from Sylvanshine's encounter with CID agent Gary (or perhaps Gerry) Britton, a 'human blank-spot' (p. 53) whose affectless gaze 'seemed to Sylvanshine more like looking *at* his right eye than *into* it' (p. 52); to §23's disturbing dream-vision of 'the placid hopelessness of adulthood' as endless rows of office workers with expressions 'blank as the faces on coins' (p. 255).<sup>36</sup> This notion of embodied blankness, of a self which has become 'untenanted', is given more extended attention in §14, where an unnamed speaker describes his father's (and increasingly, his own) unconscious tendency to lose himself 'in a stare':

<sup>35</sup> For further discussion of the compositional interrelatedness of Wallace's post-*Infinite Jest* fiction, see the coda to chapter 4.

<sup>36</sup> Severs, "'Blank as the Faces on Coins": Currency and Embodied Value(s) in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 57.1 (2016), 52–66 (p. 55).

Being in a stare referred to staring fixedly and without expression at something for extensive periods of time. [. . .] it involves gazing at something. Staring at it. [. . .] But in a stare, you are not really looking at this thing you are seeming to stare at, you are not even really noticing it—however, neither are you thinking of something else. You in truth are not doing anything, mentally, but you are doing it fixedly, with what appears to be intent concentration. [. . .] I find myself doing it. It's not unpleasant, but it is strange. Something goes out of you—you can feel your face merely hanging loose, with no muscles or expression. It frightens my children, I know. As if your face, like your attention, belongs to someone else. (pp. 118–9)

The speaker's description of 'being in a stare' evokes an emptying-out of self, a state of 'not doing anything, mentally' in which something essential 'goes out of you'. In this uncanny hollowness—a blankness made only more troubling by the suggestion that the 'staring' person's face and attention are under the control of 'someone else'—we are confronted with a clear iteration of the 'hollowed-out' characters of *Oblivion*, the absent figures who stand as human-shaped emblems of the 'silences' which punctuate Wallace's texts.<sup>37</sup>

Even as it recalls these formal and thematic concerns, *TPK* also builds on these ideas. In particular, *TPK*'s points of silence and blankness are consistently bound up with the novel's exploration of boredom. Since its publication, *TPK* has frequently been approached as a novel primarily *about* boredom: in his 'Editor's Note', Pietsch frames the novel as an attempt on Wallace's part to write 'about some of the hardest subjects in the world—sadness and boredom' (p. xi), and we find a persistent focus on the latter subject within the critical responses to Wallace's text. Clare has catalogued the 'numerous forms and representations' of boredom presented within *TPK*, suggesting that Wallace employs this 'variety of boredom' as part of an investigation of 'the roots of "boredom" as a specific historical formation of late capitalist American life'.<sup>38</sup> In taking the rote work of IRS examinations as its subject, *TPK* positions itself as a text at least partially concerned with evoking and interrogating the experience of 'extreme boredom' (p. 316): reflecting on his time working for the IRS, the fictional 'David Wallace' notes that 'I learned, in my time with the Service, something about dullness [. . .] About negotiating boredom as one would a terrain, its levels and forests and endless wastes' (p. 87).<sup>39</sup> Considering again *TPK*'s depictions of absence and silence, we can see how these textual

<sup>37</sup> Hering has further discussed *TPK*'s depiction of 'being in a stare', situating his analysis in the context of a larger exploration of formal models of reflective/refractive visibility found across Wallace's fiction (Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 156).

<sup>38</sup> Clare, 'The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in *The Pale King*', in *Long Thing*, pp. 187–208 (pp. 188, 190, 187).

<sup>39</sup> Max credibly speculates that Wallace chose to write about the IRS specifically because it 'was the dullest possible venue he could think of' (*Every Love Story*, p. 256).

‘blanks’ are now framed by this larger engagement with dullness and boredom: the novel’s most significant moments of silence are those situated within the noiseless, agonisingly dull space of the IRS examinations room, while the hollow status of its ‘untenanted’ figures is associated with an extended exposure to the extreme tedium of IRS work—work which, in its dullness, seems to provoke the kind of absent, ‘staring’ evacuation of self described by §14’s anonymous speaker.

Beyond addressing its status as a ‘novel about boredom’, critics have also approached *TPK* as a text concerned with the possibility of *overcoming* this tedium. Andersen argues that, alongside its interrogation of the nature of boredom, the novel ‘devotes at least as much energy to the question of how to *transcend* boredom by paying attention’.<sup>40</sup> If, as Clare suggests, Wallace uses the IRS as a lens through which he can more broadly interrogate the ‘modern problem’ of boredom,<sup>41</sup> then Andersen reads the novel as striving to offer a solution to this problem, a means of confronting the difficulties of—and perhaps even embracing the possibilities inherent in—the inescapable boredom of contemporary experience. Within *TPK*, this necessary confrontation with boredom is perhaps articulated most clearly by the (again unnamed) speaker of §44, who, having asserted that the ‘world of men as it exists today is a bureaucracy’ (p. 439),<sup>42</sup> goes on to offer what he sees as the ‘key’ to surviving and succeeding in this contemporary bureaucratic environment:

The underlying bureaucratic key is the ability to deal with boredom. To function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human. To breathe, so to speak, without air.

The key is the ability, whether innate or conditioned, to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex. To be, in a word, unborable. [. . .]

It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish. (p. 440)

Here, the ability to ‘deal with boredom’ is positioned as an invaluable skill within the airless, inhuman environments of ‘modern life’: the monumental—even, to employ one of *TPK*’s favoured terms, ‘heroic’ (p. 230)—effort of confronting ‘the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex’ is figured as one of *transcendence*, of

<sup>40</sup> Andersen, ‘David Foster Wallace and His Real Enemies’, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Clare, ‘The Politics of Boredom’, p. 189.

<sup>42</sup> This starkly gendered conception of a ‘world of men’ reflects the predominantly male environment of the novel’s IRS REC—and, by extension, of *TPK* as a whole. For more on the (often problematic) maleness—and, relatedly, the overwhelming whiteness—of Wallace’s final novel, see Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*; Araya, ‘Why the Whiteness?’; Thompson, ‘Wallace and Race’.

reaching a mystical ‘other side’ of boredom.<sup>43</sup> Among the novel’s characters, this ‘unborable’ status is most fully realised in the figure of Shane Drinion. Drinion—described by his colleagues as ‘possibly the dullest human being currently alive’ (p. 450)—seems ‘immune’ to boredom, with the capacity to pay complete attention to whatever is in front of him. This capacity is demonstrated in §46’s extended conversation between Drinion and Meredith Rand—a conversation which culminates in Drinion ‘hovering very slightly—perhaps one or two millimeters at most—above the seat of his wooden chair’ (p. 471). This levitation, we are told, is

what happens when he is completely immersed [. . .]. One night someone comes into the office and sees Drinion floating upside down over his desk with his eyes glued to a complex return, Drinion himself unaware of the levitating thing by definition, since it is only when his attention is completely on something else that the levitation happens. (p. 487)

Drinion, in his capacity to direct his attention ‘completely on something else’, seems to exemplify the heroic engagement with boredom described by §48’s speaker, reaching a transcendence manifested in this mystical ‘hovering’.<sup>44</sup> Significantly, however, Drinion’s superhuman attentiveness is matched by (and seems inexorably connected with) his innate and unavoidable dullness. Drinion, who demonstrates ‘nothing that could be called charm or social grace or even compassion’ (p. 451), is almost devoid of personality, possessed of an affectless vacancy—a facial expression which ‘is bland and neutral in a way that might as well be blank for all it tells you (pp. 457–8)—which seems to serve as a foundation for his unborable power of ‘complete attention’ (p. 450). In this personal ‘blankness’, Drinion seem like yet another ‘untenanted’ figure, another absent, unknowable, or otherwise ‘hollowed out’ presence: Drinion’s nickname of ‘Mr. X’, while ostensibly an ironic abbreviation of ‘Mr. Excitement’ (p. 450), seems equally to gesture towards his status as a ‘blank space’, a further point of embodied

---

<sup>43</sup> This connection between boredom and transcendence has been variously contextualised by critics. Max notes that the composition of *TPK* was informed by Wallace’s ‘growing interest’ in Buddhism and ‘Eastern religious practices’: for Max, the ‘lack of stimulation’ involved in the tedious work of IRS examinations can be read as invoking a kind of meditative state in the novel’s characters, giving them ‘a chance to open themselves up to experience in the largest sense of the word’ (Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 257). Dulk, meanwhile, draws connections between this ‘transcendent’ engagement with boredom and Wallace’s reading of Kierkegaard’s philosophy: in these terms, an engagement with boredom is figured as a ‘leap’ across a ‘dizzying abyss’, a heroic effort which ‘leads us back to meaningful, *real* existence’ (Dulk, ‘Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self’, in *Long Thing*, pp. 43–60 (pp. 53, 58)).

<sup>44</sup> In his mysterious ability to levitate, Drinion echoes *Jest*’s ‘Spandexed sweat-guru’ Lyle, who at one point reaches a comparable meditative transcendence as he ‘hovers cross-legged just a couple mm. above the top of the towel dispenser in the unlit weight room, eyes rolled up white, lips barely moving and making no sound’ (*Infinite Jest*, pp. 316, 700).



speechlessness within *TPK*'s text. However, Drinion's blankness is distinct from the 'untenanted' characters of *Oblivion* (or the other untenanted figures in *TPK*) in its positive associations. Drinion's absence does not represent the troubling 'hollow space' of boredom, but rather a state of attention, an other-directed concentration which allows him to overcome or transcend the tedium of contemporary experience. Severs suggests that Drinion stands as a corrective to *TPK*'s numerous instances of 'horrifying' absence: his blankness, while an apparently 'undesirable trait', enables an 'erasure of ego', an openness to being 'stamped' by the stories of others.<sup>45</sup> In Drinion, we seem to find evidence of Wallace reframing and recuperating the 'blank spaces' of his previous writing, finding a potentially redemptive value in the 'silent' spaces of his work.<sup>46</sup>

Even as it presents a model of an apparently constructive, valuable blankness, however, *TPK* simultaneously complicates and disturbs this redemptive ideal. While the novel establishes the heroic necessity of confronting the boredom of modernity, it is equally concerned with evoking the actual, often unbearable, experience of extreme tedium. In §9, 'David Wallace', having asserted the vital power of the boring (and particularly the IRS's deliberate employment of 'the dull, the arcane, the mind-numbingly complex' as a form of insulation against 'public protest and political opposition' (p. 85)), goes on to address the 'really interesting question; of 'why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention' (p. 87):

Maybe it's because dullness is intrinsically painful; maybe that's where phrases like 'deadly dull' or 'excruciatingly dull' come from. But there might be more to it. Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention. (p. 87)

'Wallace' suggests that there is something *behind* dullness, an 'other, deeper type of pain' within the silences of boredom. It is this unsettling 'ambient low-level' pain which makes the experience of boredom so 'excruciating'. In this context, the manifold distractions of contemporary 'information society'—a society which, 'Wallace' argues, '[e]veryone knows' is

<sup>45</sup> Severs, 'Blank as the Faces on Coins', pp. 55, 63.

<sup>46</sup> A further example of this redemptive absence is found in 'David Wallace's' description of the absolute silence of the Peoria REC's 'Immersives Room' (p. 292): here, as with Drinion, this blank state of 'total quiet' is here associated not with unsettling 'emptiness' (as it was, for example, in the 'gaps' of *Brief Interviews*), but rather with total, superhuman concentration, an attentiveness which has transcended boredom.

‘about something else, way down’—are figured as desperate attempts to avoid this ‘deeper’ pain, this ‘terror of silence with nothing diverting to do’ (p. 87). The nature of this ‘terror’ is notably difficult to articulate: ‘Wallace’ himself asserts that the subject is ‘pretty confusing, and hard to talk about abstractly’ (p. 87). This suggestion of a horrifying point behind (or beneath) boredom brings us again closer to the troubling ‘blank spaces’ of *Oblivion* and *Brief Interviews*: ‘Wallace’'s conception of an inarticulable ‘deeper type of pain’ suggests a boredom which cannot be transcended or recuperated through paying attention, a boredom which resists, and thus undermines, the redemptive model embodied by Drinion.

This suggestion of an un-redemptive or -redeemable boredom—a blankness which overwhelms any attempt at confrontation or transcendence—is demonstrated more starkly in §33, as Lane Dean desperately attempts to negotiate the extreme tedium of IRS examinations work:

Lane Dean Jr. with his green rubber pinkie finger sat at his Tingle table in his Chalk's row in the Rotes Group's wiggle room and did two more returns, then another one, then flexed his buttocks and held to a count of ten and imagined a warm pretty beach with mellow surf as instructed in orientation the previous month. Then he did two more returns, checked the clock real quick, then two more [. . .]. After just an hour the beach was a winter beach, cold and gray and the dead kelp like the hair of the drowned, and it stayed that way despite all attempts. (p. 378)

In experiencing total, unbearable boredom—a ‘boredom beyond any boredom he'd ever felt’ (p. 379)—Dean is confronted with the kind of terrifying silence described by ‘Wallace’, a blankness which obliterates all his attempts to confront, embrace, or overcome it. Like Drinion, Dean's work of extended attention again seems to result in a ‘hollowing out’ of the self: he is struck by the ‘unbidden’ thought that ‘*boring* also meant something that drilled in and made a hole’ (p. 380). Far from Drinion's heroically attentive blankness, however, Dean's extended engagement with boredom results only in ‘the sensation of a great type of hole or emptiness falling through him and continuing to fall and never hitting the floor’, a self-evacuation which leads him to picture ‘different high places to jump off of’ (pp. 380–1). Here, the ‘other side’ of boredom is imagined not as transcendence but as suicide: the ‘terror’ behind the quotidian is, for Dean, that of a self which has been ‘bored through’, not merely ‘untenanted’ but annihilated altogether. This conception of a boredom which edges upon suicide is addressed by Bennett, who finds a theoretical model for *TPK*'s more troubling existential boredoms in the philosophy

of Arthur Schopenhauer.<sup>47</sup> In Bennett's reading, Wallace's novel is profoundly informed by Schopenhauer's identification of boredom as 'the condition that underlies, indeed underpins, all of human existence': this existential boredom is both inescapable and horrifying, at once serving as 'the ultimate possibility or promise' of human life and 'lead[ing] directly, ineluctably to suicide'.<sup>48</sup> Beyond this, I would argue that the 'deeper', horrifying boredom experienced by Dean also invites us to consider the unsettling absent spaces which punctuate Wallace's own texts: in many respects, Dean's encounter with this horrifying point of total boredom reads like a further encounter with the 'essential solitude' which Blanchot finds at the heart of the literary work.<sup>49</sup> Blanchot explicitly imagines the negative language of literature as engaged in a kind of self-destructive movement:

[. . .] words, having the power to make things 'arise' at the heart of their absence—words which are masters of this absence—also have the power to disappear in it themselves, to absent themselves marvelously in the midst of the totality which they realize, which they proclaim as they annihilate themselves therein, which they accomplish eternally by destroying themselves there endlessly. This act of self-destruction is in every respect similar to the ever so strange event of suicide [. . .]<sup>50</sup>

In comparing literature and suicide—a comparison which, he acknowledges, is 'shocking in a way'—Blanchot articulates how the language of fiction always leads us back to the 'negative space' on which it is precariously constructed: this hollowed-out language 'comes from silence' and finally 'returns to silence' as well.<sup>51</sup> In its evocation of the unbearable, existential blankness of boredom, *TPK* can be read as enacting a version of this self-destructive movement, reflexively gesturing towards the unsettling, unspeakable absence at the text's heart.

In this suggestion of a more horrifying absence beneath the surface of quotidian dullness—a blankness resistant to recuperation or redemption—*TPK* draws attention to the limitations of its own attempts to find a means to 'transcending' or 'overcoming' contemporary boredom. We find evidence of these limitations even within the novel's depiction of Drinion: although serving as *TPK*'s central and most significant example of 'transcendent' attentiveness, Drinion arguably offers a distinctly imperfect model for a 'heroic' engagement with boredom.

---

<sup>47</sup> Bennett, p. 72.

<sup>48</sup> Bennett, p. 73–4.

<sup>49</sup> Blanchot, p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> Blanchot, pp. 26, 43.

<sup>51</sup> Blanchot, pp. 106, 39. This comparison inevitably invites us to consider the problematic question of how our reading of *TPK* is informed or affected by the extratextual fact of Wallace's own suicide. This question, and the inescapable difficulties which surround it, is addressed in greater detail later in this chapter.

In his seemingly total lack of personality, his apparently ‘untenanted’ status, Drinion—while not explicitly horrifying in the same way as, for example, ‘The Soul Is Not a Smithy’'s ‘demonically possessed’ Mr Johnson—nonetheless embodies a ‘blank space’ within *TPK*'s narrative, a point of absence which leaves his character unknowable to the reader. Rather than providing a programmatic example of a sustained, ‘heroic’ engagement with extreme tedium, Drinion's mystically ‘unborable’ blankness leaves him seeming, as Jon Baskin has suggested, ‘not properly human’: he has ‘not mastered the problem [. . .] so much as he has been spared from it’.<sup>52</sup> Like his associated power of levitation, Drinion's embodied ideal of total attention is figured as something unreal, beyond the realms of human possibility. This sense of the qualified, problematic nature of Drinion's redemptive potential is only further compounded when we consider that *TPK*'s most concrete and sustained discussion of Drinion's ‘transcendence’ is situated not in the novel's main text, but rather in the ‘Notes and Asides’:

Drinion is *happy*. Ability to pay attention. It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom. (p. 548)

This note offers perhaps the novel's most arresting image of a redemptive confrontation with dullness—of the potential ‘bliss’ which resides on the ‘other side’ of ‘crushing boredom’.<sup>53</sup> Here, certainly, Drinion seems positioned as a prescriptive model, someone whose example can and should be followed—a suggestion supported by the note's shift from an initially specific, third-person description of Drinion's own ‘ability to pay attention’ to a more generalised second-person instruction to pay ‘close attention to the most tedious thing you can find’. The note has been much-discussed within criticism of *TPK*, with commentators frequently employing the passage to illustrate Wallace's investment in the redemptive possibility of

---

<sup>52</sup> Jon Baskin, ‘Untrendy Problems: *The Pale King*'s Philosophical Inspirations’, in *Gesturing Toward Reality*, pp. 141–56 (pp. 147).

<sup>53</sup> Wallace's juxtaposition of ‘bliss’ and ‘boredom’ echoes Barthes's characterisation of boredom as ‘not far from bliss: it is bliss seen from the shores of pleasure’ (*The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), p. 26). For Barthes, the text of bliss ‘imposes a state of loss’ in the reader, unsettling their ‘historical, cultural, psychological assumptions’, discomfiting them ‘perhaps to the point of a certain boredom’ (p. 14). This vision of interpretative engagement resonates strikingly with the particular interpretative work demanded by *TPK*, the state of readerly discomfort, boredom, and ‘loss’ imposed by the novel's incomplete form.

‘transcending’ boredom.<sup>54</sup> I would argue, however, that the note’s primary significance lies in its positioning *outside* the novel’s main text: this vision of ‘constant bliss in every atom’ is left unincorporated into *TPK*’s narrative, located in the unstable paratextual space at the margins of Wallace’s novel. Taking this into account, we are led to consider whether the note’s ‘blissful’ version of Drinion matches up with the blank, ‘hollowed out’ character depicted in the conversation with Meredith Rand: without the supplementary information offered by this (para)text, could we confidently argue that the affectless, disconnected Drinion of §46 demonstrates—even in his state of levitating total attention—the kind of *happiness* described in the note? We as readers are left faced with the question of precisely how far *TPK*’s flawed model of transcendent engagement with boredom reflects Wallace’s writerly intentions, and how far it serves as an inevitable mark of the text’s own, very real, unfinished-ness. In his biography of Wallace, Max suggests that *TPK*’s central project was left significantly uncompleted and unsolved at the time of the author’s death,<sup>55</sup> and we find in reviews of *TPK* a consistent attentiveness to this aspect of incompleteness: Adam Kirsch argues that Wallace had ‘not resolved the tension at the heart of the project: the problem of how to write an interesting book about boredom’.<sup>56</sup> In the novel’s incomplete depiction of Drinion’s ‘blissful’ transcendence, we are thus drawn into a confrontation with ‘unresolved’ aspects of Wallace’s novel, the very real points of potential broken-ness which arise as a result of *TPK*’s unfinished form.

It could be argued that any reading of *TPK*’s points of absence and silence involves a continual negotiation between these conflicting forms of incompleteness: the deliberate ‘blank spaces’ which we have identified across the novel intersect, and sometimes conflict, with the starker textual ‘spaces’ which mark the work’s unfinished-ness. The previous chapter of this thesis has already explored how the compositional interrelatedness of *Brief Interviews*, *Oblivion*, and *TPK* informed the ‘porous borders’ of all three of these post-*Infinite Jest* works. Just as the stories in the *Brief Interviews* and (especially) *Oblivion* were punctuated by archival ‘fissures’, points which marked their status as abandoned and broken pieces of Wallace’s larger

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Andersen, ‘David Foster Wallace and His Real Enemies’, p. 15; Clare, ‘The Politics of Boredom’, p. 200; Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 201.

<sup>55</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, pp. 280, 292.

<sup>56</sup> Adam Kirsch, ‘The Importance of Being Earnest’, *New Republic*, 28 July 2011

<<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books/magazine/92794/david-lipsky-foster-wallace-pale-king>> [accessed 15 January 2019].

work-in-progress, so *TPK* is marked by visible traces of its connections to these preceding texts: the anonymous recollection of ‘soaring, ceilingless tedium’ (p. 255) in §23, for example—with its closing image of a grammar school characterised by ‘rows of empty faces and shadowless lights and wire mesh in the windows’ (p.256)—reads almost like an alternate draft of the civics classroom setting of ‘The Soul Is Not a Smithy’. Beyond these examples of the novel’s unstable edges, meanwhile, *TPK* is also characterised by further flaws and breakages throughout the work, moments which draw attention to its unfinished status. In his ‘Editor’s Note’, Pietsch—having noted that *TPK* would be ‘vastly different had [Wallace] survived to finish it’—draws explicit attention to the various ‘draft sloppinesses’ still present in the published text: from the awkward overuse of certain words and images (‘the terms “titty-pinching” and “squeezing his shoes”, for example, would probably not be repeated as often as they are’) to the fact that ‘at least two characters have Doberman hand puppets’ (p. xi). In approaching the ‘less-than-final’ (p. xi) published text of *TPK*, however, it is impossible to distinguish these (presumably unintentional) ‘sloppinesses’ from the novel’s parallel employment of deliberate gaps and flaws: we cannot know with any certainty, for example, whether the recurrence of ‘Doberman hand puppets’ (which indeed appear to be mysteriously owned by two separate characters in the novel) were part of Wallace’s design, or merely marks of authorial carelessness. These apparent points of compositional or editorial awkwardness open up a more fundamental ‘gap’ in our reading, creating textual ‘spaces’ which we as readers cannot confidently fill.

We find a key example of this interpretative uncertainty, these unreadable ‘blanks’, in the ambiguous figure of ‘X’. X appears most notably in §19: a chapter consisting of an extended conversation on ‘civics and selfishness’ (p. 132)—related in almost entirely unattributed dialogue—between DeWitt Glendenning (the Director of the Peoria REC) and a group of junior IRS examiners. In his conspicuous anonymity, X has been a subject of critical debate: Boswell, for example, confidently identifies X as Shane Drinion (‘whose nickname’, he reminds us, ‘is X, or Mr. X’),<sup>57</sup> while Kelly disputes this conclusion, arguing that, while it may be ‘tempting’ to associate X with Drinion, ‘the characters of these two men seem entirely at odds with one another, which may indicate that the X in §19 was simply a placeholder for the name of a

---

<sup>57</sup> Boswell, ‘Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in *The Pale King*’, in *Long Thing*, pp. 209–225 (p. 225, n. 3).

character as yet undecided by Wallace’.<sup>58</sup> Commenting on this (apparently minor) dispute, Groenland notes how *TPK*’s ‘unfinished elements’ give rise to inevitable critical ‘differences in opinion’: indeed, X crystallises the interpretative problems which confront any reader of *TPK*, the impossibility of disentangling the text’s deliberate ‘absences’ from its parallel points of compositional incompleteness.<sup>59</sup> In this way, the anonymous X seems to stand as a further example of an empty, ‘untenanted’ character, another—arguably more fundamentally absent—human-shaped breach in the novel’s fabric.

These points of irresolvable ambiguity are evident throughout *TPK*: even the novel’s title resists coherent interpretation, with critics continuing to debate over its intertextual source, as well as the specific nature of its significance within the text.<sup>60</sup> While, in the incomplete narrative offered by the published novel, the ‘pale king’ seems to refer most concretely, as Jeff Staiger has noted, to ‘a formidable higher-up at the IRS, never seen and perhaps never meant to be seen even in the final version’, commentators have read the title as associated with a number of other key characters and ideas: Staiger, for example, goes on to note that the ‘Jesuit who inspires Fogle to change his life is significantly referred to as “pale”’,<sup>61</sup> while Stephen Shapiro argues that DeWitt Glendenning should be regarded as the primary candidate for the novel’s ‘eponymous pale king’.<sup>62</sup> Max, meanwhile, suggests that the title’s ambiguity reflects a corresponding authorial uncertainty on Wallace’s part: drawing on Wallace’s notebooks, Max argues that, where the ‘pale king’ was initially intended to refer to ‘the I.R.S., or possibly to the state of contentment and focus the book advocated’, it eventually came, over the course of the novel’s protracted composition, to serve as a ‘synonym for the depression that tormented’ Wallace.<sup>63</sup> Surveying this range of conflicting critical interpretations, we can again see how the unfinished status of *TPK* serves as both echo and amplification of the points of indeterminacy

<sup>58</sup> Kelly, ‘Novel of Ideas’, p. 22, n. 16. Kelly’s conclusion is potentially supported by Wallace’s notes, which seem to refer to Drinion and X (a ‘talent-arrangement genius’ (p. 546)) as distinct and separate characters.

<sup>59</sup> Groenland, ‘A King of Shreds and Patches’, p. 231.

<sup>60</sup> Hayes-Brady, for example, traces the novel’s title back to a mention of ‘pale kings, and princes too’ in John Keats’s 1819 poem ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ (*Unspeakable Failures*, p. 60), while Sullivan alternately posits that the title may refer to ‘the pale king of terrors’, a ‘nineteenth-century folk expression [. . .] meaning the melancholy fear of death’ (‘Too Much Information’, para. 16).

<sup>61</sup> Jeff Staiger, ‘David Foster Wallace’s Contest with Himself’, *New England Review*, 36.2 (2015), 90–111 (p. 109).

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Shapiro, ‘From Capitalist to Communist Abstraction: *The Pale King*’s Cultural Fix’, *Textual Practice*, 28.7 (2014), 1249–71 (p. 1276).

<sup>63</sup> Max, ‘The Unfinished’, para. 83.

and undecidability which we traced across Wallace's preceding fictional work. While the novel's ambiguous title resembles, at least in part, the empty, silent spaces—the 'gaps' left for readers to attempt to fill—which punctuate all of Wallace's writing, it also opens out onto a further silence, a starker undecidability borne of the work's actual incompleteness. Like all the novel's breaks and fissures, *TPK*'s title stands both as an invitation to readerly participation and a reminder of the limits of our interpretative engagement. In reading the self-consciously unfinished document presented by the published *Pale King*, we are forced to recognise that our efforts to imaginatively 'finish' the novel will always come up against this point of unreadable blankness: an absence which seems to intersect with unsettling 'deeper' silences—the unspeakable negativity which resided beneath the surface of boredom—evoked throughout *TPK*'s narrative.

#### 'Ephemeral, useless, undramatic, distracting': Maximalism and Excess

While *TPK*'s concern with absence and silence links it directly with *Brief Interviews* and *Oblivion*, it also diverges from these works in certain significant ways: even in its unfinished state, the novel displays a commitment to the construction of something larger, distinct from the shorter, disconnected pieces of the previous books—a principle which instead looks back towards the maximalism of *Jest*. While composing the novel, Wallace famously conceived of *TPK* as a 'long thing' ('Editor's Note', p. vii), and this long-ness is built into the text at every level: from the micro (in Wallace's characteristic long, looping sentences) to the macro (in the novel's wealth of characters, perspectives, styles, forms, and voices). While *TPK* does not have the reach or scope of *Jest*—Staiger, for example, suggests that the novel transposes *Jest*'s style and concerns into a 'minor register', subjecting his previous novel to a 'systematic diminishment'—it nonetheless offers a demonstrable break from both the fragmentary pieces of *Brief Interviews* and the introverted, claustrophobic spirals of *Oblivion*.<sup>64</sup> Instead, the novel recalls *Jest* in the extent to which it once more explores and embodies *excess*, employing an unmanageable surplus of text to convey both the information 'overload' of contemporary American culture and the spiralling logorrhoea of its characters' self-conscious thought. In §2—which follows Claude Sylvanshine as he approaches the Peoria REC by plane—we are faced with a familiar depiction of hyper-self-consciousness: shifting variously between Sylvanshine's

---

<sup>64</sup> Staiger, p. 92.



troubled interior monologue, his jumbled recollections of his past failures, his anxieties over his current position at the IRS, and the external stresses of the crowded aeroplane. Throughout, Sylvanshine is perturbed by his attempts to study for the Certified Public Accountant exam— attempts hampered by his tendency towards excessive thinking: ‘Knowing that internal stress could cause failure on the exam merely set up internal stress about the prospect of internal stress’ (p. 16). This crippling self-consciousness echoes the state of ‘analysis paralysis’ felt by *Jest*’s cast of addicts,<sup>65</sup> and particularly that of Ken Erdedy in its second chapter: significantly, both Erdedy and Sylvanshine end their respective chapters physically rooted to the spot by their own excesses of anxious, self-conscious thought.<sup>66</sup> De Bourcier has explored how Wallace’s syntax in *TPK* explicitly echoes the depiction of ‘analysis-paralysis’ in *Jest*, noting how, in both novels, ‘excessively complex syntax is associated with an unhealthy mode of thought’: in §2, this echo is felt most acutely in the chapter’s final, 3-page sentence, where Wallace employs a literal excess of language, an unending cascade of clauses and subclauses, to offer a textual reflection of the ‘storm in [Sylvanshine’s] head’ (p. 12).<sup>67</sup>

While *TPK* demonstrates clear connections with and echoes of *Jest*, it also, again, demonstrates a shift or development in focus. A key aspect of this shift is seen in the novel’s interrogation of the nature and texture of contemporary excess: throughout *TPK*, the ‘overload’ of language and information which characterises contemporary experience is figured in terms of a totalising, inescapable *noise*, a cacophony of overlapping and competing voices and sounds cumulatively felt as an indiscriminate roar. This notion of ‘noise’ originates—and is explained most clearly—not in *TPK*, but in Wallace’s non-fiction writing: specifically, in ‘Deciderization 2007 – a Special Report’, an essay originally published as an introduction to *The Best American Essays 2007*. In ‘Deciderization’, Wallace relates his experience—as the collection’s guest editor—of reading through

essays on everything from memory and surfing and Esperanto to childhood and mortality and Wikipedia, on depression and translation and emptiness and James Brown, Mozart, prison, poker, trees, anorgasmia, color, homelessness,

<sup>65</sup> See Wallace, *Infinite Jest*: ‘most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking. [ . . . ] the cute Boston AA term for addictive-type thinking is: *Analysis-Paralysis*’ (p. 203).

<sup>66</sup> Sylvanshine is finally immobilised by ‘a kind of paralysis’ (p. 23), while Erdedy—caught between the simultaneous ringing of telephone and doorbell—is left ‘splay-legged, arms wildly out as if something’s been flung, splayed, entombed between the two sounds, without a thought in his head’ (*Infinite Jest*, p. 23).

<sup>67</sup> De Bourcier, ‘Syntax and Narrative’, p. 22.

stalking, fellatio, ferns, fathers, grandmothers, falconry, grief, film comedy [. . .]<sup>68</sup>

For Wallace, the work of confronting this excess is ‘both numbing and euphoric’: at his ‘rate of consumption’, this mass of undifferentiated data is experienced as a generalised ‘Total Noise’, a static roar which, he argues, is ‘also the sound of our U.S. culture right now, a culture and volume of info and spin and rhetoric and context that I know I’m not alone in finding too much to even absorb, much less to try to make sense of’.<sup>69</sup> In *TPK*, we find Wallace taking up this key image, framing the novel’s excess in terms of this ‘noise’. Sylvanshine’s swirling mass of internal anxieties and external impressions, for example, are metaphorically reflected in his failed attempt to listen to the sound of the plane’s propellers: ‘Sylvanshine tried to think of what the props sounded like but could not except as a gnawingly hypnotic rotary hum so total that it might have been silence itself’ (p. 16). Here and throughout the novel, this flattened-out noise is figured as the mirror-image and inextricable partner of silence: this static roar directs us back towards the same ‘deeper sadness’ which resides behind the noiseless absence of total boredom. We find a further example of this in Lane Dean, whose experience of the extreme boredom of IRS examinations (a job which involves confrontation with endless excesses of data) is reflected in his observations on the noise of locusts outside: Dean, who notes that ‘the normal protocol is not to hear them’, is struck by the disturbing suggestion that ‘[i]f you think of the locusts as actually screaming, the whole thing becomes much more unsettling’ (p. 125). Again, this consistent ‘noise’—a noise which we would ordinarily tune out of everyday experience—seems to exist as the other side of silence, another manifestation of an unspeakable absence. This suggestion again seems partly to gesture back to the concerns of *Jest*: in many respects, Wallace’s earlier novel offers a series of depictions of characters attempting—whether through drug addiction, competitive tennis playing, or surrendering to the lethal pleasures of the novel’s titular ‘Entertainment’—to avoid confrontation with this horrifying ‘something else’ which exists on the other side of both the silence of boredom and the ‘noise’ of contemporary US life. Viewed from this perspective, however, *TPK* distinguishes itself from *Jest* in its primary concern with those engaged in attempts to *confront* this overwhelming noise: the novel’s focus on the IRS holds significance for Wallace not merely—as Max suggests—as ‘the dulllest

<sup>68</sup> David Foster Wallace, ‘Deciderization 2007 – a Special Report’, in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. 299–317 (p. 301).

<sup>69</sup> Wallace, ‘Deciderization’, p. 301.

possible venue he could think of', but also as an institution founded upon the (undeniably boring) project of sorting, organising, and making sense of the excess data of contemporary US society.

This essential discrepancy between *Jest* and *TPK* is well-illustrated if we return to the thematic and formal excess of Sylvanshine's plane journey in §2: where Sylvanshine's spiralling, self-conscious loops of thought echo the narcissistic spirals of *Jest*'s addicts (or *Oblivion*'s collection of narcissistic, self-absorbed voices), Sylvanshine distinguishes himself in the extent to which his anxiety is specifically and explicitly linked to this 'noise', to his attempts to make sense of the 'cyclone of logistical problems and complexities' (p. 26) which confront him. In his frustrated attempts to study for the CPA exam, Sylvanshine is concerned with the problem of 'perspective, filtering, the choice of perception's objects' (p. 17): even as he recognises that he himself is 'weak or defective in the area of will', he retains an awareness that the 'entire ball game, in terms of both the exam and life, was what you gave attention to vs. what you willed yourself to not' (p. 14). In this question of attention, we find the 'noise' of contemporary information overload again converging with the novel's depiction of the 'blank spaces' of boredom: contemporary information excess, like contemporary boredom, can only be overcome through the difficult work of sustained attentiveness, the 'heroic' effort of organising this swirling mass of contextless data—an effort which forms the basis of IRS examinations. The precise nature of this attention is illustrated most clearly in the speech delivered by an anonymous 'substitute accounting professor' (p. 219) at the climax of Chris Fogle's long narrative in §22. The substitute's speech positions the 'accounting profession' as defined by a courage which is only more valuable in its apparent banality: 'True heroism is *a priori* incompatible with audience or applause' (p. 232). This 'heroism' is founded on an engagement with boredom—the substitute argues that '[e]nduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is' (p. 231)—but also, crucially, on an engagement with excess data:

Yesterday's hero pushed back at bounds and frontiers—he penetrated, tamed, hewed, shaped, made, brought things into being. Yesterday's society's heroes generated facts. For this is what society is—an agglomeration of facts. [. . .] But it is now today's era, the modern era [. . .] In today's world, boundaries are fixed, and most significant facts have been generated. Gentlemen, the heroic frontier now lies in the ordering and deployment of those facts. Classification, organization, presentation. (p. 234)

In the sustained attention they pay to the excessive, unmanageable 'agglomeration of facts' which constitute contemporary society, accountants are positioned as embodying a particularly

modern (and particularly American) ‘heroism’: the substitute goes on to explicitly characterise accountants as ‘today’s cowboys. [. . .] Riding the American range. Riding herd on the unending torrent of financial data’ (p. 235).<sup>70</sup> While this hyperbolic, romanticised imagery is comically absurd, the substitute’s speech is significant in further establishing the parameters of *TPK*’s ‘heroic’ conception of attention, the extent to which the novel finds redemptive potential in kind of sustained engagement with contemporary ‘noise’ demonstrated by the novel’s IRS workers.

This notion of the redemptive potential of attention can again be traced back from *TPK* to Wallace’s non-fiction writing: in ‘Deciderization’, for example, Wallace, having introduced the concept of ‘Total Noise’, goes on to argue for the moral and social necessity of paying attention to this information excess: in the face of the ‘seething static’ of contemporary culture—and of ‘total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect, and how, and why, &c.’—Wallace asserts the vital importance of ‘deciding’, of the essential work of ‘absorption, organization, and triage’ which is required of us if we are to consider ourselves ‘informed citizen[s]’.<sup>71</sup> Relatedly, Wallace’s well-known 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech (later published as *This is Water*) offers the central thesis that:

the liberal arts cliché about ‘teaching you how to think’ [is] actually shorthand for a very deep and important truth. ‘Learning how to think’ really means learning how to exercise some control over *how* and *what* you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to *choose* what you pay attention to and to *choose* how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot or will not exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed.<sup>72</sup>

Here, again, Wallace insists on the importance of paying attention, of actively *choosing*, from the mass of information which underpins the ‘boredom, routine, and petty frustration’ of day-to-day experience, which of this data is relevant, significant, or meaningful to our lives.<sup>73</sup> Both of these essays are useful in their introduction to and explication of ideas later taken up by Wallace in *TPK*. As we have seen across Wallace’s career, however, the relationship between fiction and

---

<sup>70</sup> The precise nature of, and critical context for, *TPK*’s particular depiction of ‘heroism’ has been explored in greater detail by Hayes-Brady, who suggests that the novel ‘combines the figure of the romantic hero with that of the ironic hero, ultimately figuring the kind of reflective romanticism Wallace advocated across the board in his writing’ (Hayes-Brady, ‘Palely Loitering’, p. 143).

<sup>71</sup> Wallace, ‘Deciderization’, pp. 301–3. ‘Deciderization’ is notable in situating this work of attention in a specific social and political context: towards the end of the essay, Wallace explicitly suggests that ‘[t]here is just no way that 2004’s reelection could have taken place—not to mention extraordinary renditions, legalized torture, FISA-flouting, or the passage of the Military Commissions Act—if we had been paying attention and handling information in a competent grown-up way. “We” meaning as a polity and culture’ (p. 301).

<sup>72</sup> Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (Little, Brown and Company, 2009), pp. 52–5.

<sup>73</sup> Wallace, *This is Water*, p. 65.

non-fiction is less straightforward than it might initially appear: while there are clear overlaps, we should be cautious of any attempt to use these supplementary texts to ‘explain’ or ‘flesh out’ the ideas of Wallace’s fictional work (even, and perhaps especially, a work as broken and unfinished as *TPK*). Even as it echoes the ideas of these essays, *TPK* can be seen to problematise—to explore the inevitable limits of—the more straightforwardly programmatic, redemptive rhetoric of these earlier texts. If both ‘Deciderization’ and ‘This is Water’ offer arguments for the value and necessity of attention, then *TPK* is more often concerned with the points where this sustained attentiveness fails, with an excess which has become so overwhelming as to make the work of ‘choosing’ or ‘deciding’ impossible—a ‘noise’ which, like the ‘deeper’ absence of boredom, is often overwhelming and un-redemptive. We have already addressed how Drinion’s apparently redemptive model of total, mystical attentiveness is complicated through *TPK*; beyond this, we find throughout the novel further examples of characters who are unable to confront or make sense of the excess of contemporary experience.

A key example of this is seen in Sylvanshine, whose inability to manage the excess of his thoughts and experiences in the aeroplane approach of §2 is taken up and amplified in later chapters. In §15, for example we learn that Sylvanshine is a ‘fact psychic’, afflicted by a supernatural/medical condition—also known as ‘*Random Fact Intuition*’ (p. 120)—which manifests in the intrusion of ‘sudden flashes of awareness’, psychic insights which are ‘structurally similar to [. . .] the dramatically relevant foreknowledge we normally conceive as ESP or precognition’, but, crucially, almost exclusively consist of contextless, irrelevant data, information which is ‘ephemeral, useless, undramatic, distracting’ (p. 120). Sylvanshine is unable to control or stop the flow of this information, to the extent that his consciousness is constantly invaded by these unwanted trivia:

Perhaps one in every four thousand such facts is relevant or helpful. Most are like having someone sing ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ in your ear while you’re trying to recite a poem for a prize. (p. 122)

In many respects, Sylvanshine’s condition seems to offer a funhouse-mirror distortion, an absurd amplification, of the ‘total noise’ of contemporary experience: Sylvanshine’s ‘world of fractious, boiling minutiae’ is, in a sense, only an exaggerated reflection of US culture more generally. Significantly, the sheer volume of information so overwhelms Sylvanshine that the ‘heroic’ attention advocated in ‘Deciderization’ and ‘This is Water’ is entirely out of reach: Sylvanshine’s confrontation with excess results not with Drinion-style transcendence, but with

‘[c]onstant headaches’, an inevitable failure in the face of ‘[o]verwhelming’ data (p. 123). Notably, Sylvanshine’s attempts to gather information on the Peoria REC are fundamentally limited: in §30, we find him reporting to his colleague Reynolds, whose job is to ‘analyze Sylvanshine’s initial field reports and reduce them to relevant fact patterns’ (p. 360). Here, Wallace suggests that Sylvanshine—in his constant, heightened state of direct confrontation with information excess—has become unable to carry out the vital work of choosing or deciding between this data, unable to offer the necessary attention required of him, both as an IRS employee and more generally as a citizen of contemporary US society.

Beyond this, Sylvanshine’s experience of the torrent of excess information which accompanies ‘Random Fact Intuition’ can be seen not only as a general reflection of the ‘noise’ of contemporary American culture, but also as a self-conscious reflection of the textual excess, the mass of fragmentary data, presented by *TPK*’s text. Burn has pertinently argued that Sylvanshine offers a reflective ‘model’ of the ‘centrifugal’ structures and strategies employed in the novel, noting that ‘the logic that underlies many of the short fragments that interrupt [*TPK*’s] longer narrative seems to be the same logic that drives a Random Fact Intuition’.<sup>74</sup> Looking beyond Sylvanshine, we can see how *TPK* works—like so much of Wallace’s earlier fiction—to embody the information excess it describes: Boswell argues that the novel ‘seeks to embody what it hopes to overcome’, suggesting that, by ‘forcing the reader to comb through the welter of data and information that constitutes the bulk of the novel, the reader is forced into the position of a IRS tax examiner who must “process and reduce the information . . . to just the information that has value”’.<sup>75</sup> Throughout *TPK*, we are faced with a text which reflexively takes the shape of this overwhelming excess of data, this ‘total noise’: from the characteristically Wallaceian torrential sentences, to the self-consciously ‘involving and confused data dump[s]’ which are ‘inflict[ed]’ (p. 70, n. 3) on the reader in the voluminous, page-dwarfing footnotes of the ‘David Wallace’ chapters. While these formal strategies are to some extent familiar from Wallace’s earlier writing, they also reflect Wallace’s changing conception of the ‘noise’ of information excess: where *Jest*, for example, expanded into a self-conscious *bigness*—a maximalism which both invoked and subverted traditions of fictional encyclopaedism—*TPK*’s formal excess are more often figured in terms of the disorganised,

<sup>74</sup> Burn, ‘A Paradigm’, p. 161.

<sup>75</sup> Boswell, ‘Author Here: The Legal Fiction of David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*’, *English Studies*, 95.1 (2014), 25–39 (p. 35).

swirling mass of irrelevant, contextless data which characterises 'Total Noise'.

It is significant that the novel's longest chapter is one defined primarily by irrelevance. The first-person account of Chris Fogle in §22 presents us with—at 98 pages—perhaps *TPK*'s most 'complete', sustained narrative, and has been regarded by various critics as the thematic centrepiece and foundation of Wallace's novel: Baskin, for example, argues that Fogle stands as the 'moral and philosophical center of *The Pale King*'.<sup>76</sup> Fogle's narrative—tracing his progression from youthful, nihilistic 'wastoid' to committed member of the IRS, and culminating in the substitute accounting lecturer's speech on the 'heroism' of accounting—seems to offer the novel's clearest example of the 'heroic', redemptive value of attention, the necessity of decision and choice in the face of contemporary excess.<sup>77</sup> This suggestion is problematised, however, by the formal qualities of Fogle's narrative, the extent to which it echoes and embodies this very excess: it may only be later in *TPK* that we are informed of 'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle's nickname, but this central principle of irrelevance can be seen to define Fogle's 'vocational soliloquy' (p. 259, n. 3) at every turn, as, throughout the chapter, Fogle shows himself to be chronically unable to sort between relevant and irrelevant data. As readers, we are forced to negotiate endless digressions and extensions, abrupt shifts between vital plot points and absurdly extended lists of pop-cultural ephemera—as in his recollection of his youth in the 'Chicagoland area in the 1970s' (p. 158):

I can remember things I wore—a lot of burnt orange and brown, red-intensive paisley, bell-bottom cords, acetate and nylon, flared collars, dungaree vests. I had a metal peace-sign pendant that weighed half a pound. Docksidiers and yellow Timberlands and a pair of shiny low brown leather dress boots which zipped up the sides and only the sharp toes showed under bell-bottoms. [. . .] I remember everyone despising Gerald Ford, not so much for pardoning Nixon but for constantly falling down. Everyone had contempt for him. Very blue designer jeans. (p. 159)

From Fogle's perspective, the 70s are reduced to a contextless list of items of clothing, a seemingly endless array of irrelevant information which both describes and embodies the flattened-out 'noise' of contemporary culture (a noise in which, significantly, momentous social events such as Watergate are reduced to further fragments of meaningless data). While Fogle himself associates this 'trouble just paying attention' (p. 156) with his nihilistic, 'wastoid'

<sup>76</sup> Baskin, 'Untrendy Problems', p. 150.

<sup>77</sup> Andersen goes so far as to assert that the arguments made within Fogle's chapter are 'almost identical to the ones made by Wallace' in *This is Water*, arguing that 'it almost sounds as if Chris Fogle were in the audience during Wallace's Commencement Speech' ('David Foster Wallace and His Real Enemies', p. 13).

youth—the period before he ‘put away childish things’ and began ‘the process of developing some initiative and direction in my life, which obviously led to my joining the Service’ (p. 174)—the chapter’s tendency towards structural irrelevance undermines the aspect of teleological, redemptive ‘progression’ which Fogle wants to impress upon us. The chapter’s excesses of text, information, and data evoke Fogle’s continued inability to decide, his powerlessness in the face of the ‘noise’ of his own subjective experience. This sense of Fogle’s failure is solidified in later chapters: in §24, for example, ‘David Wallace’ explicitly frames Fogle’s account as a ‘cautionary example’ (p. 259, n. 3) of narrative irrelevance, a story which inflicts upon the reader ‘a regurgitation of every last sensation and passing thought’ (p. 261). ‘Wallace’ later notes that Fogle is ‘unpopular out of all proportion’ to his otherwise ‘decent and well-meaning character’: it is this tendency to founder ‘in extraneous detail’ (p. 273, n. 17) which makes him so unbearable.<sup>78</sup> Fogle, then, stands as an unavoidably compromised model of redemptive attention, the digressive excesses of text embodied by his narrative figuring another failure in the face of information overload.

The chapter’s bigness, like the bigness of *TPK* as a whole, is felt not in terms of an unbounded expansiveness (as in *Jest*), but rather in an absurd overextension; in fact, the story perhaps more directly recalls ‘Westward’ in its self-conscious status as a story which simply ‘goes on too long’. ‘David Wallace’’s notes inform us that Fogle’s account originated—within *TPK*’s fictional reality—as part of an ‘1984 Personnel Division motivational/recruitment faux documentary debacle’: the same documentary project which serves as the framework for the fragmentary ‘video interviews’ of §14. ‘Wallace’ goes on to note that this project ‘ended up as a debacle in part because Fogle and two or three other maundering grandstanders took up so much film and time’ (p. 259). While Fogle’s narrative offers the novel’s starkest example of embodied ‘noise’, we find this suggestion of an inability to manage textual excess reflected throughout *TPK*: even as he critiques Fogle’s ‘irrelevance’ (explicitly assuring us, at one point that ‘I am not Chris Fogle’ (p. 261)), ‘David Wallace’’s chapters demonstrate a comparable tendency towards digression and irrelevance: from their copious, often extraneous footnotes, to their digressive employment of useless data (such as, for example, his ‘interpolation[s]’ on, amongst other topics, ‘the most notable businesses and industries based in metropolitan Peoria as of

---

<sup>78</sup> Fogle’s failure to manage the excesses of IRS work is further implied in ‘Wallace’’s oblique reference to the ‘great injustice’ of ‘what eventually happened’ to Fogle, a downfall seemingly connected with the use of drugs which Fogle took ‘entirely for professional reasons’ (p. 273, n. 17).



1985' (p. 268)). In seeking to distance himself from Fogle, 'Wallace' draws ironic attention to his own failures of concision and choice, suggesting that Fogle's irrelevance is only one manifestation of a wider, collective failure of attention in the face of the overwhelming excess of contemporary experience.<sup>79</sup> We are faced with the implication that, even in their attempts to confront this irrelevant information, almost all of *TPK*'s characters are eventually overwhelmed by this 'noise'—a noise which we are in turn confronted with in the form and shape of the novel's text.

This distinction between the overwhelming expansiveness of *Jest* and the more disorganised, fragmentary 'noise' of *TPK*'s excesses reflects a shift not only in Wallace's conception of information overload, but also, arguably, in the kind of excess which Wallace saw as increasingly prevalent in early-21<sup>st</sup> century culture. Addressing *Jest*'s growing popularity in the decade after its publication, Max notes that, while 'the novel was connecting with more and more readers',

the world had changed drastically in the decade since Wallace had written it. The current danger was not from total immersion but from relentless fragmentation, not from watching one video to death but from skipping among hundreds. Americans were now not passively but frenetically entertained [. . .]<sup>80</sup>

In many ways, it is this notion of a fragmented, 'frenetic' entertainment which we find evoked in *TPK*'s 'noisy' excess: a reflection not of the 1990s televisual culture addressed in *Jest*, but rather of the unprecedented excesses of information which characterise 21<sup>st</sup> century life, as most clearly embodied and exemplified by the internet. While the internet was in existence at the time of *Jest*'s publication (and was regarded by certain reviewers as informing the novel's depiction of information 'overload'),<sup>81</sup> its influence on Wallace's earlier fiction was apparently limited: in a February 1996 interview, for example, Wallace asserted that 'you don't have to be on the Internet for life to feel this way', and explicitly claimed to have 'never been on the Internet'.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> We find a further example of this failure of choice in the figure of Meredith Rand, whose own tendency towards narrative digression leads, we are informed in Wallace's notes, to her reputation as 'a yammerer of the most dire kind, on and on, excruciating to be around' (p. 546).

<sup>80</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 286.

<sup>81</sup> See, for example, Sven Birkerts, who argued that *Jest*'s 'webbed, branched' plot, while not explicitly 'about electronic culture', nonetheless showed signs of having 'internalized some of the decentering energies that computer technologies have released into our midst' (Birkerts, 'Infinite Jest: A Postmodern Saga of Damnation and Salvation', *The Atlantic*, 1996, para. 10, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1996/02/the-alchemists-retort/376533/>> [accessed 25 January 2019]).

<sup>82</sup> Wallace, 'Interview with Mark Caro' (1996), in *Conversations*, pp. 53–7 (p. 57). This position had evidently shifted somewhat by May 1996, when Wallace took part in a 'Web Chat' interview with readers of *Word* online magazine (Wallace, 'Live Online').

Wallace apparently remained ambivalent towards the internet throughout his life: Max asserts that he was instinctively ‘wary of the emerging technology’, quoting a 2001 letter to a graduate student in which Wallace claimed to allow himself ‘to Webulize only once a week now’, and noting that Wallace ‘didn’t become a consistent emailer for several years afterward’.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, I would suggest that the ever-more prevalent influence of the internet’s vast mass of fragmentary data, its offering of an overwhelming and infinite number of decisions and choices, can be felt far more acutely and persistently through *TPK*’s evocation of contemporary ‘Total Noise’.

Admittedly, this suggestion of the novel’s concern with 21<sup>st</sup>-century excess seems counterintuitive when taking into account *TPK*’s mid-80s setting. In fact, *TPK* is significant, as Boswell has recognised, in being Wallace’s only novel not set in an imagined near-future:

Although *The Broom of the System*’s cartoonish 1990s America is almost indistinguishable from the mid-Eighties world of the novel’s creation, and *Infinite Jest*’s post-millennial America was clearly imagined from the vantage point of the actual early Nineties, both novels take place in a fully replete alternative reality that seems to have branched off from the reader’s world and pursued its own quirky, though plausible, path.<sup>84</sup>

In contrast with the exaggerated, hyperreal settings of *Broom* and *Jest*, *TPK* situates itself in ‘a carefully reconstructed historical past’, evoking the specific cultural and historical texture of 1985 Peoria.<sup>85</sup> Even in turning towards the past, however, Wallace’s novel retains a continued concern with reflecting on his own contemporary moment. By abandoning the cartoonish, vaguely science-fictional scenarios of *Jest* and *Broom*—scenarios which, Boswell argues, lend both earlier novels ‘an almost a-historical and, at times, even spectral quality’ which obscures ‘the historical contingency of their signature themes’—*TPK*’s historical setting signals a more urgent concern with interrogating a particular ‘turning point’ for contemporary US culture, a shift which, Wallace suggests, laid the foundations for his own early-21<sup>st</sup> century present.<sup>86</sup> *TPK* has been read by critics as demonstrating a more concretely social and political focus which distinguishes it from Wallace’s previous fiction: Kelly, for example, argues that the novel joins Wallace’s later non-fiction writing (including ‘Deciderization’) in addressing ‘ideas which are

<sup>83</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, pp. 286–7.

<sup>84</sup> Boswell, ‘Trickle-Down Citizenship’, p. 209.

<sup>85</sup> Boswell, ‘Trickle-Down Citizenship’, p. 209.

<sup>86</sup> Boswell, ‘Trickle-Down Citizenship’, p. 209. *TPK*’s mid-80s setting also holds a specific resonance in gesturing back towards the beginning of Wallace’s own writing career, which began with the publication of ‘The Planet Trillaphon’ in a 1984 issue of *The Amherst Review*.

not only overtly political but also importantly historical',<sup>87</sup> while Boswell asserts that, '[m]ore so than any of his other major works, *The Pale King* wrestles directly with matters of real world politics and [. . .] civics'.<sup>88</sup> In this unprecedentedly 'real-world' focus, *TPK* seems to employ its 1980s setting to interrogate the sociopolitical foundations of Wallace's late-capitalist US present (a suggestion supported by the fact that the fictional 'author's foreword' offers a self-consciously retrospective view of the novel's action from 'this fifth day of Spring, 2005' (p. 69)). In particular, the novel's background subplot concerning the showdown between the 'Old IRS'—the traditional, 'conservative' proponents of the 'Service' as 'an arena of social justice and civic virtue' (pp. 84–5)—and the 'New IRS'—a competing group of 'more progressive, "pragmatic" policymakers who prized the market model, efficiency, and a maximum return on [. . .] investment' (pp. 84–5)—has been convincingly read as tracing the historical roots of the contemporary US's individualistic culture of neoliberalism.<sup>89</sup> David Harvey has succinctly defined neoliberalism as a 'theory of political economic practices' which 'holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions'; for Harvey, neoliberalism has been undeniably 'incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world', to the extent that it has become 'hegemonic as a mode of discourse'.<sup>90</sup> We can see, then, how *TPK*'s depiction of an 'involved intra-Service battle'—a battle centred around the question of 'whether and to what extent the IRS should be operated like a for-profit business' (p. 85)—serves, at least in part, as a microcosmic depiction of the neoliberalisation of late 20<sup>th</sup> Century America. By setting his novel in 1985, Wallace—far from turning away from his contemporary moment—rather approaches the 1980s, as Kelly has suggested, as a 'key transitional moment to contemporary American society', an origin point for the hegemonic late capitalism of 21<sup>st</sup> century US culture.<sup>91</sup>

Running parallel to this political focus, however, I would argue that *TPK*'s 1980s setting is also significant in its pinpointing of a shift in the nature of contemporary information excess. In his review of the novel, Tom McCarthy asserts that

by backtracking to the 'Flintstonianly remote' era of mainframe computers,

---

<sup>87</sup> Kelly, 'Novel of Ideas', p. 14.

<sup>88</sup> Boswell, 'Trickle-Down Citizenship', p. 209.

<sup>89</sup> See, for example, Boswell, 'Trickle-Down Citizenship'; Clare, 'The Politics of Boredom'; Kelly, 'Novel of Ideas'; Shapiro.

<sup>90</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 2–3.

<sup>91</sup> Kelly, 'Novel of Ideas', p. 17.

tape-and-card-based data storage and so on, Wallace identifies a watershed moment, a kind of base layer in the archaeology of the present [. . .]<sup>92</sup>

While McCarthy once again characterises *TPK*'s historical setting in terms of its retrospective identification of a foundational point in the 'archaeology' of contemporary culture, this argument is here framed in technological, rather than political, terms, with the suggestion of something centrally significant in the novel's 'backtracking' depiction of 1980s-era 'mainframe computers, tape-and-card-based data storage and so on'. Part of this significance, I would suggest, is in the *physicality* of the novel's excesses of information. This is felt, for example, in Sylvanshine's post-traumatic recollections of the 'debacle' at his previous posting at the IRS's 'Rome NY Northeast Regional Examination Center': a departmental bureaucratic failure which, we learn, escalated to the status of disaster after the department in question attempted to 'hide the growing pile of returns and cross-audit receipts and W-2/1099 copies rather than duly reporting the backlog' (p. 9). Here, the 'backlog' of unsorted excess data is physically manifested in the overwhelming mass of accumulating forms, receipts, and returns which the IRS examiners cannot bring themselves to 'burn, shred, or pack in Hefties and discard' (p. 10). It is this concretised 'overload' which continues to haunt Sylvanshine: he 'still dream[s]' of

desk drawers and air ducts stuffed with forms and forms' edges protruding from grilles over the ducts and the utility closet stacked to the top with Hollerith cards and the Inspections Division lady forcing the door and the cards all falling out on her like McGee's closet as the whole debacle caught up to them [. . .]  
(p. 12)

This nightmarish vision of analogue excess is troubling in part in the extent to which it transfigures contemporary information overload into something manifest and real, an acutely felt mass of data which threatens to literally crush the examiners under its weight. From the novel's 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, however, the images also carry a further, more unsettling implication: running beneath Sylvanshine's anxiety is a concurrent suggestion that this physicalised excess is, like the punch-cards and receipts themselves, outdated, a relic of a 'Flintstonianly remote' past. In many respects, these visions of paper-based overload stand in contrast with the disturbingly *unreal*, digital excesses of the contemporary world (as exemplified by the internet)—a swirling mass of information which is conversely even more troubling in its

---

<sup>92</sup> Tom McCarthy, 'David Foster Wallace: The Last Audit', *The New York Times*, 14 April 2011, section Books <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/books/review/book-review-the-pale-king-by-david-foster-wallace.html>> [accessed 6 August 2019].

essential *unreality*, its ungraspable abstraction.<sup>93</sup> In its retrospective, ‘backtracking’ focus, *TPK* allows Sylvanshine’s recollections of these analogue, physical ‘disasters’ to be overshadowed, rendered quaintly obsolete, by our inevitable awareness of the more unmanageable (and, with this, more troubling) ‘overloads’ of 21<sup>st</sup> century experience.

In its depiction of this analogue overflow, we can see how *TPK*’s 1980s setting describes a tipping point for contemporary excess, a historical moment when this mass of data ceased to be manageable or comprehensible in physical, real-world terms. This suggestion is further shown when we turn to the ‘four previously unpublished scenes’ included in the novel’s paperback edition. The last and longest of these scenes—featuring, as Pietsch notes in his editorial introduction, ‘several characters not seen elsewhere in the novel’ (p. 560)—is primarily concerned with an IRS examiner named T. Hovatter’s stated intention to:

take a year entirely off work and school and devote himself to a personal project of evidently watching every last second of television broadcast in the month of May 1986. (pp. 561–2)

Hovatter’s project is founded on the ‘advent of cable television in all but the most rural outlying parts of Peoria’, an innovation which has resulted in an increase from ‘the four classic traditional TV stations’ to a total of ‘twelve channels overall’ (p. 562). In his attempt to ‘watch everything broadcast locally for one month’, Hovatter thus technically requires twelve months in total, ‘hence the full-time year off of all other pursuits’ (p. 562). The majority of the following scene is taken up with the other IRS examiners’ involved discussions of the complex logistics of Hovatter’s project: from the difficult work of taping ‘whatever was on the other channels besides the one he was watching at a given time’ (a task which, due to the maximum length of VHS tapes, requires changing over ‘every four hours’ (p. 564); to the necessary additional time required for Hovatter to ‘eat, sleep, bathe’ (p. 569); to the complicated question of precisely ‘what he means by watching’ (with one colleague considering the parameters of ‘how closely must he attend, can he alternate what he watches, must he pause the tape every time he goes to the bathroom, etc.’ (p. 571)). Even in its transparently comic, grandiose pointlessness, Hovatter’s ‘heroic’ effort stands as a further example of an engagement with

---

<sup>93</sup> This implied sense of *TPK* as identifying an origin point for the incorporeal nature of contemporary excess chimes with its concurrent focus on the unreal, abstract qualities of neoliberal capitalism: Richard Godden and Michael Szalay have explored how *TPK* addresses ‘the unstable relation between corporeality and the forms of abstraction inherent in finance capital’ (Godden and Szalay, ‘The Bodies in the Bubble: David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*’, *Textual Practice*, 28.7 (2014), 1273–1322 (p. 1276)).

‘Total Noise’: although Hovatter himself remains a mostly peripheral, unspeaking figure through the scene, his colleagues speculatively characterise his scheme as a confrontation with the ‘signal and noise’ of televisual culture, an attempt to pay attention, to identify that which is ‘important’ or ‘crucial’, within the endless ‘extraneous choices’ of late-20<sup>th</sup> century American experience (p. 572–3).

Once again, however, our impression of this excess is informed by awareness of its historical specificity, its outdatedness. From our retrospective position, we as readers are left aware of the fact that Hovatter’s project of watching *everything*—while still technically possible with his circa-1985 total of twelve television channels—would be wholly impossible in the face of the overwhelming masses of data which have come to characterise 21<sup>st</sup> century life. Even within the chapter, Hovatter’s colleagues already imagine a near-future where ‘they offer fifty channels’, acknowledging that ‘[t]his may be the last time a lone man can absorb it all’ (p. 573).<sup>94</sup> Here, again, we find Wallace positioning the novel’s 1980s setting as a critical moment in the development of contemporary information excess, a point of no return which serves both as an embryonic ‘origin’ for the ‘Total Noise’ of ‘Deciderization’, and also as a comparative reminder of the unimaginable enormity of our 21<sup>st</sup>-century digital ‘overload’. Hovatter’s project crystallises the shift in the depiction of information excess which has occurred in Wallace’s writing between *Jest* and *TPK*: in his effort of constant, uninterrupted *watching*—a ‘sense-overload’ which, his colleagues predict, will finally leave him ‘all slumped’ (p. 568)—Hovatter serves as both echo and obverse of the viewers of *Jest*’s Entertainment, a character immobilised not by a single source of lethally-pacifying distraction, but rather by the sheer effort of attempting to attend to, and choose between, the manifold fragmentary, ‘frenetic’ entertainment(s) of contemporary experience.

In many respects, *TPK*’s evocation of an incomprehensible, fragmentary excess inevitably informs our understanding of the novel’s own fragmentary, disorganised, and frequently excessive unfinished text. It is again worth acknowledging the significance of the Hovatter scene’s positioning *outside* the limits of *TPK*’s ‘main text’. We have already addressed

---

<sup>94</sup> Again, this sense of the exponential proliferation of contemporary ‘noise’ is bound up with the novel’s concurrent depiction of the developing hegemony of neoliberal marketisation: when one of Hovatter’s colleagues asks whether this growing mass of extraneous data might be the result of a shadowy ‘conspiracy’, another responds by more prosaically linking it to the demands of ‘the market’: ‘[p]eople want choice, you give them choice’ (p. 572).

how these paratextual materials draw reflexive attention to the structural ‘blank spaces’, the points of compositional silence and incompleteness, found throughout the published *Pale King*; we could equally, however, argue that these supplementary passages and notes demonstrate and embody a kind of manifest excess, creating the impression of a literary work which, in its unfinished-ness, ruptures and exceeds its own boundaries, stretching into a disorganised, ‘noisy’ incoherence. To a certain extent, this suggestion of a self-consciously unbounded mass of text follows the example of *Jest*’s 388 endnotes—notes which comparably established the novel as a work of unbounded maximalist hugeness, exceeding even its own generous limits. Here, again, however, we as readers are forced to negotiate the intersection between Wallace’s deliberate strategies of incompleteness and the starker, more fundamental incompleteness presented by *TPK*: even as they echo the ‘surplus text’ of Wallace’s earlier novel, the paratexts which append to the published *Pale King* also present us with a more tangible incompleteness. Beyond *Jest*’s self-conscious maximalism, *TPK* offers a more concrete example of a work which cannot be adequately contained, a novel which seems to embody—in terms starker than those of Wallace’s previous writing—the kind of overflowing textual and informational excess described, for example, in Sylvanshine’s recollection of the overflowing ducts and cabinets of the Rome REC.

*TPK*’s inevitable structural fragmentation is evident not only at the work’s transparently ‘broken’ edges, but throughout the published novel as a whole. We find evidence of this structural disorganisation in the unstable depiction of various characters through the novel: Stephen Burn, for example, has argued that Sylvanshine, while ‘a prominent presence throughout the book’, is ultimately ‘insufficiently integrated into the novel’s proposed arc’.<sup>95</sup> Even in the published *Pale King*, Sylvanshine is notable as a character who seems to exist, as Burn has suggested, in a state of ‘flux’: Sylvanshine’s initial journey to the Peoria REC in §2, for example, is conspicuously lacking reference to the ostensibly overwhelming, inescapable condition of ‘Random Fact Intuition’ introduced in §15—an absence which is perhaps explained in one of Wallace’s included ‘Notes and Asides’, which, in positioning Sylvanshine as ‘the fact psychic’, goes on to acknowledge that this development ‘would require rewriting the Sylvanshine arrival sequence’ (p. 542).<sup>96</sup> Meanwhile, in §49—a chapter viewed through the eyes of Chris Fogle—Sylvanshine and his partner Reynolds appear as a pair of self-important

---

<sup>95</sup> Burn, ‘A Paradigm’, p. 159.

<sup>96</sup> Burn, ‘A Paradigm’, p. 159.

‘legendary dickheads’ (p. 530), a characterisation which seems, as Burn asserts, ‘entirely divorced from his earlier appearances’.<sup>97</sup> Of course, as with the text’s blanks and silences, it is more often than not impossible to draw any kind of clear line between the intentional and the unintentional aspects of *TPK*’s structural disorganisation. I have already noted Burn’s suggestion that Sylvanshine offers a self-conscious reflection of Wallace’s own difficulties in composing *TPK*: from this perspective, the character’s unstable ‘combination of bodily presence and mental dispersion’ are framed as an (at least partially) deliberate ‘figure for writer’s block’.<sup>98</sup> Beyond this, I would suggest that Sylvanshine’s instability finally resists and—in his ‘brokenness’—*exceeds* our attempts to offer any kind of coherent reading of his character. Even as he offers a deliberate commentary on the experience of ‘total noise’, Sylvanshine also embodies and exemplifies the unavoidably chaotic, excessive, and unreadable nature of Wallace’s unfinished text.<sup>99</sup>

This notion of *TPK* as a work which exceeds and overwhelms our efforts at interpretation is also evident in the extent to which it consistently gestures towards a larger mass of text, one which exists beyond the limits of the printed book. In reading the published, edited version of *TPK*, we are made persistently aware of the more expansive collection of notes and drafts now housed in Wallace’s archive: from Pietsch’s introductory reference to the ‘hundreds and hundreds of pages’ of writing divided between ‘[h]ard drives, file folders, three-ring binders, spiral-bound notebooks, and floppy disks’ (p. viii); to the conspicuous gaps and limitations of the included ‘Notes and Asides’ (the origins of which are, as Groenland comments, ‘not documented in detail’, with no ‘chronological or material information’ to help place them in any kind of definite context);<sup>100</sup> to the aforementioned ‘unstable’ depictions of various characters through the novel. In these instances, the published *Pale King* is haunted by the peripheral, ghostly presence of this larger excess, of a manifestation of the work which—

---

<sup>97</sup> Burn, ‘A Paradigm’, p. 159. This alternate characterisation seems to reflect an earlier version of Sylvanshine described in the included notes, which make reference to Reynolds and Sylvanshine ‘liv[ing] together—sort of like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*’ (p. 546)—a description at odds with the generally solitary, anxious, hyper-self-conscious Sylvanshine encountered through much of the published *Pale King*.

<sup>98</sup> Burn, ‘A Paradigm’, p. 160.

<sup>99</sup> Sylvanshine is far from the only character in *TPK* to show evidence of this underlying compositional ‘brokenness’: Groenland, for example, has employed Wallace’s drafts and notes in exploring comparable aspects instability in the depiction of characters including Shane Drinion, Toni Ware, and Chris Fogle (‘A King of Shreds and Patches’).

<sup>100</sup> Groenland, ‘A King of Shreds and Patches’, p. 224.



while nowhere near ‘finished’—nevertheless stands as something like a ‘total’ (or at least unabridged) version of *TPK*’s chaotic text. In this suggestion of an implied ‘whole’ beyond the reach of the printed book, *TPK* recalls the mythologised missing ‘five hundred pages’ of *Jest*.<sup>101</sup> Like *Jest*’s ‘broken circle’ structure (as well as the extratextual framing offered by Wallace’s interviews), the published *Pale King* points us at every turn towards a larger, inaccessible version of its own text. Where *Jest*’s unfinished plotlines seem to ‘converge’ towards an imagined ‘completion’ beyond the limits of the printed book, however, *TPK* only gestures towards a further excess, to the more concrete mass of textual ‘noise’ now collected in the archive. In its invocation of this physical textual excess, of the ‘hundreds and hundreds of pages’ which could not all be contained within this printed work, *TPK* recalls the unfinished novel of the reclusive novelist Bill Gray, the protagonist of Don DeLillo’s *Mao II*. In DeLillo’s novel, Gray deliberately leaves his work perpetually unfinished and unpublished, existing only as a vast mass of draft and notes hoarded by his assistant Scott: an ‘entire house filled with pages, pages spilling into the shed that abutted the back of the house, a whole basement containing pages’.<sup>102</sup> While the posthumous nature of *TPK* obviously distinguishes it from the deliberate unfinished-ness of Gray’s novel, the published version of Wallace’s final work is nonetheless haunted by a comparable suggestion of an excess of unmanageable text. In its chaotic ‘noise’, *TPK* both invites us to, and reminds us of the inevitable problems of, attempting to interpretatively piece together this essentially broken ‘whole’.

### ‘The living human holding the pencil’: Intertextuality and Influence

Since *TPK*’s publication, critics have placed focus on teasing out the various sources and points of influence invoked over the course of Wallace’s unfinished text: from McHale and De Bourcier’s discussions of the novel’s continued debt to the postmodern ‘patriarchs’ who so informed Wallace’s early writing;<sup>103</sup> to Shapiro’s assertion of the vital intertextual significance of ‘Melville’s anti-capitalist fiction’;<sup>104</sup> to Hayes-Brady’s consideration of the influence of

<sup>101</sup> See Steven Moore, ‘The First Draft of *Infinite Jest*’.

<sup>102</sup> Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Vintage, 1992), pp. 223–4.

<sup>103</sup> See McHale, and De Bourcier, ‘Forms, Punch Cards and LETTERS: Self-Reference, Recursion and (Un)Self-Consciousness in *The Pale King*’s Representation of Bureaucracy’, *English Studies*, 95.1 (2014), 40–58.

<sup>104</sup> Shapiro, p. 1267.

British Romantic poetry on *TPK*'s depiction of contemporary 'heroism';<sup>105</sup> to Burn's further exploration of the disparate range of echoes and allusions scattered throughout the novel.<sup>106</sup> Surveying these critical responses, we can see how *TPK*'s diverse intertextual engagements follow, at least in part, the model established by Wallace's earlier work, building on the already dense network of intertexts established by, for example, *Jest*'s self-conscious allusions to *Hamlet*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and avant-garde cinema, or *Brief Interviews*' pointed formal echoes of the 'constrained writing' of the OuLiPo. *TPK*, however, distinguishes itself from these immediately preceding examples in the extent to which its invocation of these intertexts is bound up with an underlying anxiety, a self-consciousness frequently manifested in uneasy, unstable terms. We have already discussed how the edited text of the published *Pale King* draws attention to the precarious edges of Wallace's unfinished novel. When considered in terms of its intertextual engagements, however, *TPK*'s unstable boundaries serve to remind us not only of its general unfinished-ness, but also specifically of the points where it intersects and collides—sometimes awkwardly—with its literary sources, influences, and 'ancestor texts'. In his analysis of Wallace's personal library (as collected in his archive), Mark Sheridan has noted how these books—many of which are covered with annotations ranging from 'words that he gleaned and wished to learn' to 'rough ideas and character sketches for future work'—illustrate the blurred 'boundary between text and intertext', demonstrating the often literal ways in which Wallace's writing is written 'in the margins' of other texts.<sup>107</sup> Sheridan argues that this 'blurring' is felt only more starkly in the case of *TPK*—a novel in which 'unedited drafts and sketches' have become 'part of the final product', where the boundaries of the published 'novel' exist in an unprecedentedly provisional, unstable state.<sup>108</sup> Thompson elsewhere offers a specific example of this kind of 'intersection', noting how Wallace's copy of Walker Percy's 1961 novel *The Moviegoer* is filled with 'jottings of plot ideas, character names, and narrative fragments' for *TPK*. For Thompson, these notes show Wallace 'literally writing his own fiction *between the*

<sup>105</sup> Hayes-Brady, 'Palely Loitering'.

<sup>106</sup> Burn, 'A Paradigm'. Burn identifies a range of 'ancestor texts' (p. 152) for *TPK* which stretches significantly beyond the familiar remit of American metafiction, including T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, B. S. Johnson's 1973 work *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*, C. S. Lewis's 1961 text *An Experiment in Criticism*, Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and Walker Percy's 1975 essay collection *The Message in the Bottle*.

<sup>107</sup> Mark Sheridan, 'Interpret you, INTERPRET-ME? Or, Fictional Pasts and Fictional Futures: The Predecessors and Contemporaries of David Foster Wallace', in *Critical Insights*, pp. 78–93 (p. 80).

<sup>108</sup> Sheridan, p. 80.

lines of Percy's', offering us a 'profoundly revealing glimpse into the way that [Wallace's] work so often enacts a sophisticated response to an earlier text'.<sup>109</sup> While these points of intertextual 'collision' are inevitably only ever partially visible in *TPK*'s published form, Sheridan and Thompson's archival observations nonetheless offer a useful contextual frame for understanding the fraught quality of the allusions found within the novel.

We find an example of this more self-conscious, uneasy kind of allusion in the sections of *TPK* dedicated to Toni Ware, chapters which take on a voice distinctly unlike Wallace's characteristic style:

There were fires in the gypsum hills to the north, the smoke of which hung and stank of salt; then the pewter earrings vanished without complaint or even mention. Then a whole night's absence, two. The child as mother to the woman. These were auguries and signs: Toni Ware and her mother abroad again in endless night. Routes on maps that yield no sensible shape or figure when traced. (p. 56)

In his review of *TPK*, Sullivan comments on the ambiguous quality of these uncharacteristic passages: he initially suggests, for example, that the Toni Ware sections are the 'most remarkable pages in *The Pale King*', sounding, in their lyrical, 'unselfaware' straightforwardness, unlike 'anything else Wallace wrote', and demonstrating more clearly than anywhere else the fulfilment of Wallace's desire to 'find some other level, to go beyond *Infinite Jest*'.<sup>110</sup> Crucially, however, Sullivan also identifies—alongside the 'beauty and terror' of these passages—a 'whiff of pastiche', going on to argue that

Wallace seems to be making fun of bad Cormac McCarthy, the incorrigible McCarthy who, when he wants to write 'toadstools', writes 'mushrooms with serrate and membraneous soffits where-under toads are reckoned to siesta'.<sup>111</sup>

We can see how these passages invoke the presence of McCarthy, both generally in their self-consciously ornate, archaic language ('auguries and signs') and specifically in their direct echoes of McCarthy's fiction (the mention of 'gypsum hills' seems, for example, to directly reference a line from McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*).<sup>112</sup> Sullivan's review is astute in capturing the uneasiness of this allusion, the extent to which these passages function both as comic, ironic critiques of McCarthy's stylistic tics and also, conversely, as apparently earnest

<sup>109</sup> Thompson, *Global Wallace*, p. 172.

<sup>110</sup> Sullivan, para. 27.

<sup>111</sup> Sullivan, para. 27.

<sup>112</sup> See Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* (London: Picador, 1993): 'he rode up through white gypsum hills grown with stunted datil and through a pale bajada crowded with flowers of gypsum like a cavefloor uncovered to the light' (p. 248).

attempts on Wallace's part to follow McCarthy's example in striving towards 'something more satisfyingly conventional, more *adult* in his work'.<sup>113</sup> Here, *TPK* engages in a mode of intertextual engagement which, in its underlying ambivalence, seems to distinguish the novel from the allusive strategies established across *Oblivion*, *Brief Interviews*, and *Jest*.

In this more self-consciously ambivalent relationship with its literary intertexts, *TPK* looks back to the starker generational anxiety displayed in Wallace's earlier fiction: most notably in the pastiches, borrowings, and 'ventriloquised' voices of *Girl*. In many respects, Wallace's parodic/reverent allusions to McCarthy can be read as another instance of the uneasy 'usurpation' which Wallace ('borrowing' from Ozick) positioned in 'Westward' as standing at the foundation both of intertextual engagement and of fiction-writing more generally.<sup>114</sup> This notion of literary usurpation or plagiarism, of a work which steals from, or otherwise ventriloquises, the voices of other writers, is reintroduced in §9 of *TPK*, as 'David Wallace' describes how, as a means of paying his way through college, he provided 'a certain service' (p. 77) for his wealthy classmates:

In a nutshell, the truth is that the first pieces of fiction I was ever actually paid for involved certain other students at the initial college I went to [. . .]. Without going into a whole lot of detail, let's just say that there were certain pieces of prose I produced for certain students on certain academic subjects, and that these pieces were fictional in the sense of having styles, theses, scholarly personas, and authorial names that were not my own. (p. 76)

While 'Wallace' acknowledges that his primary motivation for this plagiarism—a practice which leads to his expulsion from college, and precipitates his eventual employment at the IRS—was 'financial' (p. 76), he also invites us to consider how 'these sorts of exercises would be good apprentice training for someone interested in so-called "creative writing"' (p. 77). Within the chapter's fragmentary 'vocational memoir' (p. 72), the fictional 'Wallace's' literary career is traced back to this formative act of ventriloquism: a kind of writing which, while not recognisable as 'fiction', is nonetheless founded on his ability to 'usurp' a series of alternate 'styles, theses, scholarly personas, and authorial names'. Although the biography offered in §9 self-consciously diverges from the facts of the actual Wallace's life (significantly, Wallace was never expelled from college, nor was he employed by the IRS), this 'origin myth' nonetheless

---

<sup>113</sup> Sullivan, para. 27. *TPK*'s complex, ambivalent invocation of McCarthy has been further explored by Thompson ("Books Are Made out of Books": David Foster Wallace and Cormac McCarthy', *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, 13.1 (2015), 3–26).

<sup>114</sup> See Chapter 2.

draws a tangible line of connection from *TPK* back to the instances of literary ‘usurpation’ which characterise Wallace’s early work.<sup>115</sup> Boswell has suggested that *TPK*’s ‘David Wallace’ sections offer a ‘coded memoir of [Wallace’s] development as a writer’, and we can see how this (at least semi-) fabricated narrative of juvenile plagiarism functions as a kind of fictionalised account of the ‘usurpations’ of *Girl*—instances of anxious intertextual ventriloquism which, as we have seen, are brought once more to the surface within *TPK*.<sup>116</sup>

This recapitulation of Wallace’s uneasy early intertextual engagements is complicated, however, by the fact that *TPK*’s most significant ‘usurpation’ is arguably found in the figure of ‘David Wallace’ himself. Despite the speaker’s claims to be the ‘real author, the living human holding the pencil’, *TPK*’s ‘David Wallace’ sections remind us of the essential *unreality*, the performative artificiality, of this ‘abstract narrative persona’ (p. 68). In this, the ‘Author Here’ chapters can thus be read as engaging in a kind of uncanny ‘ventriloquism’ of Wallace’s own writerly voice, a heightened pastiche of the author’s recognisable stylistic tics: from the juxtaposition of obscure technical jargon with informal, folksy colloquialisms, to the self-conscious tendency towards digressive verbosity, to the copious employment of excessive, page-dwarfing footnotes (a technique largely absent from the remainder of *TPK*). Max has suggested that, following the publication of *Jest*, Wallace ‘began to doubt the aspect[s] of his work that many readers admired most’, and it is easy to read these chapters as offering a parodic critique of the techniques—the ‘endlessly fracturing narratives’ and ‘stem winding sentences’—

---

<sup>115</sup> The truth of Wallace’s plagiarism-for-hire story been the subject of critical debate. In his interview with Lipsky, Wallace admits to having ‘written a couple of papers for other people’ while studying at Amherst, describing how the experience made him feel ‘like a weird kind of forger. I mean, I can *sound* like anybody’ (Wallace, qtd. in Lipsky, p. 258). Max, however, has cast doubt on this claim, relating how he ‘never found anyone on the receiving end of such a transaction or had direct knowledge of one’, and noting that even Wallace’s Amherst roommate Mark Costello believed that these stories were simply examples of the author’s ‘self-mythologizing’ tendencies (‘A Conversation With D.T. Max About His New David Foster Wallace Biography’, interview with Michelle Dean, *The Awl*, 2012, para. 31 <<https://www.theawl.com/2012/08/a-conversation-with-d-t-max-about-his-new-david-foster-wallace-biography/>> [accessed 12 February 2019]).

<sup>116</sup> Boswell, ‘Legal Fiction’, p. 37. Boswell’s term is drawn from Wallace’s 1993 interview with McCaffery, where Wallace characterised *Broom* as a ‘coded autobio’ (Wallace, ‘Interview with McCaffery’, p. 41).

which had come to stand as Wallace's unwelcome authorial trademarks.<sup>117</sup> This aspect of reflexive critique has been addressed by various critics: Konstantinou, for example, argues that the novel's 'mercenary "David Wallace" is an object of fun, an emblem of what Wallace came to dislike most about his own literary style',<sup>118</sup> while Miley argues that these chapters find Wallace 'plagiarizing' his own style, stealing from the voice of the 'persona that readers have come to expect from him'—that of the 'bandanna-wearing, footnote-obsessed maximalist David Foster Wallace'.<sup>119</sup> In this aspect of self-plagiarism, *TPK* both echoes and reframes the intertextual ventriloquisms of Wallace's early work. The novel arranges itself around a central instance of usurpation, an anxious intertextual engagement, not with a literary precursor (as with Barth in 'Westward'), but rather with 'Wallace' himself.

The uneasy quality of this central 'self-usurpation' is compounded by the unstable position of 'David Wallace' in *TPK*'s text. To some extent, the 'Author here' chapters can be seen to offer a 'frame' for *TPK*'s otherwise disparate collection of narrative fragments: by positioning *TPK* as his own 'vocational memoir', 'Wallace' casts himself as the author, not only of these 'autobiographical' sections, but rather of the novel as a whole. In §9's 'Foreword', 'Wallace' explains that his 'nonfiction account' has been subjected to 'some slight changes and strategic rearrangements' in response to the 'legal and corporate concerns' (p. 72) of his editor: in this way, *TPK*'s variety of voices, perspectives, characters, and styles—its notably un-memoir like employment of 'features like shifting p.o.v.s, structural fragmentation, willed incongruities, & c.' (p. 74)—are explained as deliberate, editorially-enforced strategies for protecting 'Wallace' and his publishers from the litigation of the novel's 'real' subjects.<sup>120</sup> If we take 'Wallace' at his word, the entirety of *TPK* is organised by his own overarching 'authorial'

<sup>117</sup> Max, 'The Unfinished', para. 7. Wallace's tics and 'trademarks'—and his wider public persona—have been likewise parodied and ventriloquised in the work of his contemporary fiction-writers: Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, for example, features a single heavily-footnoted chapter which serves as an unambiguous pastiche of Wallace's characteristic voice (Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (London: Corsair, 2011), pp. 175–90); while Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot* features a hyper-self-conscious, bandanna-wearing central character who reads very much like a version of Wallace himself (Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012). For more on Wallace's complicated influence on his contemporaries, see Konstantinou, 'Wallace's "Bad" Influence', in *Cambridge Companion*, pp. 49–66; and Boswell, *The Wallace Effect*.

<sup>118</sup> Konstantinou, 'Unfinished Form', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 6 July 2011, para. 3 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/unfinished-form/>> [accessed 14 November 2018].

<sup>119</sup> Miley, p. 200.

<sup>120</sup> 'Wallace' further explains that the 'distorted depersonalized, polyphonized, or otherwise jazzed up' quality of *TPK* is equally a product of the status of his own notebooks, which—as befitting his youthful desire to become 'an immortally great fiction writer la Gaddis or Anderson, Balzac or Perec'—were 'themselves literarily jazzed up and fractured; it's just the way I saw myself at the time' (pp. 75–6).

presence: Staes has suggested that ‘Wallace’ can be read as ‘the narrator of the entire novel’, a ‘fictional “ghost”’ whose spectral presence both haunts and ‘governs’ the whole of Wallace’s unfinished text.<sup>121</sup> In his exploration of the novel’s compositional history, Hering notes that the ‘Author Here’ chapters were only added to *TPK* in the final stages of its composition (the period between 2005 and Wallace’s death in 2007): these chapters thus reflect the actual Wallace’s attempts to ‘create a frame story for his increasingly disparate narrative’—by positioning this ‘author’ at the text’s centre, Wallace establishes ‘a pervasive structural spine’ for his baggy, unfinished work, while at the same time dramatising his own ‘curatorial role over the mass of data that he had accumulated’.<sup>122</sup> In Hering’s reading, this ‘frame’ places a problematic limit on our interpretative engagement: in contrast with the open-ended ‘dialogism’, the polyphony of conflicting voices and perspectives, which characterised Wallace’s previous fiction, *TPK*’s apparently disparate narratives all point back to the authorial presence of ‘Wallace’, the ‘self-confessed sole voice of the text’—a monologic, ““correct” reader and writer of everything’, whose in-text presence inevitably constrains our own readerly responses to Wallace’s work.<sup>123</sup>

While Hering’s reading is convincing in detailing the compositional importance of—and interpretative limitations imposed by—these ‘authorial’ interventions, I would contest his suggestion that these ‘David Wallace’ chapters succeed in offering any coherent ‘frame’ for our reading of *TPK*. I would argue that, even as it establishes an apparent narrative ‘spine’ for the novel, *TPK* is equally concerned with demonstrating the essential inadequacy of ‘Wallace’’s claims for monologic mastery over the text. This aspect of limitation is arguably already present within the ‘Author’s Foreword’, as ‘Wallace’ attempts to establish the parameters of the ‘contract’ between author and reader:

Our mutual contract here is based on the presumptions of (a) my veracity, and (b) your understanding that any features or semions that might appear to undercut that veracity are in fact protective legal devices, not unlike the boilerplate that accompanies sweepstakes and civil contracts, and thus are not meant to be decoded or ‘read’ so much as merely acquiesced to as part of the cost of our doing business together, so to speak, in today’s commercial climate. (pp. 74–5)

While, in his proposed ‘contract’, ‘Wallace’ offers an explicit attempt to direct the nature and scope of our reading, this effort is from the outset transparently, comically limited. In asking us

<sup>121</sup> Staes, ‘Work in Process’, pp. 80, 82.

<sup>122</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 136.

<sup>123</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, pp. 146, 161.

to treat the novel's contents as 'really true', 'Wallace' insists that the 'literary' aspects of *TPK*—the aforementioned 'shifting p.o.v.s, structural fragmentation, willed incongruities'—be regarded as nothing more than 'protective legal devices', features 'not meant to be decoded or "read" so much as merely acquiesced to': within this transactional model of textual engagement, we are finally, absurdly, instructed not to 'read' *TPK* at all. Far from restricting our interpretative engagement, however, 'Wallace's' instructions serve only to demonstrate the limits of this ostensibly didactic 'framing': just as its claims to 'veracity' only remind us of *TPK's* fictionality, so these attempts to direct and constrain our reading only remind us of the degree to which the novel exceeds 'David Wallace's' gestures of authorial control, the fact that his status as monologic 'author' is inevitably less secure than his assertions would have us believe.

The underlying instability of 'Wallace's' position as 'author' is further complicated when we again take into account the actual unfinished-ness of Wallace's text. Throughout this chapter, we have repeatedly addressed how our reading of the published *Pale King* is informed by an awareness of the novel's incompleteness: in its unfinished state, we as readers are confronted with a mass of disorganised narrative fragments, partially-developed plots and characters, and structural 'breaches', which cumulatively exceed even the 'distorted depersonalized, polyphonized, or otherwise jazzed up' (p. 75) qualities—the familiar strategies of deliberate fragmentation and incompleteness—which the fictional 'Wallace' assigns to his own work. Ultimately, our awareness of *TPK's* tangible broken-ness serves to further destabilise the notion of any kind of 'frame' or 'spine' for Wallace's novel: the posthumously-published text of *TPK* exceeds any aspect of, control, constraint, or structural unity which either the fictional 'Wallace' or the real Wallace attempt to impose upon it. The novel's 'David Wallace' stands not as a figure of monologic authorial 'mastery', but rather as an essentially unstable and contingent character, one who—like Sylvanshine, Drinion, and Fogle—mirrors the structural incompleteness of the text as a whole.

This contingency is further reflected when tracing 'Wallace's' progression across the published text. Within the included 'Notes and Asides', we find reference to a plan for 'David Wallace' to disappear '100pp in', with another note elaborating that 'Wallace disappears—becomes creature of the system' (p. 548). While a number of critics have read this



‘disappearance’ as a key component of Wallace’s project for *TPK*,<sup>124</sup> Hering—drawing on the further contextual information provided by Wallace’s archive—has asserted the danger of attaching outsized significance to these compositional fragments:

One must be careful when referring to the two notes [concerning the ‘disappearance’ of ‘David Wallace’] as these are written some years before the ‘Author Here’ sections and should not be considered as coterminous with Wallace’s post-2005 adaptation of the frame narrative. To consider them as such risks an inexact analysis, collapsing together two distinct temporal periods of composition.<sup>125</sup>

Hering is right to warn against reading these earlier notes—which date back to an ‘embryonic outline’ for the novel written in November 1999, long before the 2005 incorporation of ‘Wallace’ as the work’s fictionalised ‘author’—as straightforwardly applicable to the ‘final’ iteration of *TPK*. However, when considered from our own, inevitably limited and subjective, position as readers of the novel in its posthumously-constructed form, we can nevertheless find a version of this ‘disappearance’ taking place over the course of Wallace’s unfinished work. The beginnings of this apparent vanishing into ‘the system’ are arguably found in ‘David Wallace’’s account of his introduction to the Peoria REC: ‘Wallace’ relates how his employment for the IRS was initially disrupted by an institutional ‘snafu’, a bureaucratic error which led to his being mistaken for ‘a completely different David Wallace, viz. an elite and experienced Immersives examiner’ (p. 297, n. 48). In a later chapter, we learn that this error was the result of a flaw in the IRS’s archaic computer systems, a defect which resulted in a ‘ghost conflation’ of the two David F. Wallaces: ‘[i]n effect, David F. Wallace, GS-9, age twenty, of Philo IL, did not exist; his file had been deleted, or absorbed into, that of David F. Wallace, GS-13, age thirty-nine, of Rome NY’s Northeast REC’ (p. 413). Already, we can see how ‘Wallace’’s entry into the IRS is deliberately built on a kind of vanishing, a self-negating absorption into an impersonal bureaucratic ‘system’ (the ‘author’ markedly goes on to refer to himself as ‘the “unreal” David Wallace’ (p. 416), with his higher-ranking double taking the position of ‘real’

<sup>124</sup> See, for example, McHale, who reads ‘Wallace’’s disappearance as a direct echo of the vanishing of Tyrone Slothrop in the final section of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (McHale, p. 208).

<sup>125</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, pp. 181–2, n. 23.

David F. Wallace (p. 414)).<sup>126</sup>

Beyond this plot-level example, ‘Wallace’'s ‘disappearance’ is further evident in a gradual stylistic shift felt across the novel’s various ‘authorial’ chapters. In contrast with the exaggeratedly ‘Wallaceian’ verbal excesses of, for example, §9’s ‘Author’s Foreword’, later chapters are notable in the extent to which this ‘authorial’ voice begins to sound increasingly abstract, increasingly anonymous: §38, for example, is missing ‘Wallace’'s assertions of his unquestionably ‘real’ status, while §43 (apparently the final chapter narrated by the ‘author’), is conspicuous in abandoning the footnotes and associated stylistic tics which have hitherto served as touchstones for the fictional ‘Wallace’'s self-parodic voice. In tracing ‘Wallace’'s apparent progression towards stylistic ‘invisibility’, it is important to recognise our own inability to determine how far this movement follows Wallace’s designs for *TPK*: the sequence itself was, of course, constructed and organised as such by Pietsch, not Wallace, while furthermore we—approaching the published text—cannot answer the question of whether the later, more anonymous ‘authorial’ chapters are a relic of earlier drafts of the work. While this unknowability places a limit on our ability to interpret *TPK*’s broader narrative structure or ‘progression’, however, it is difficult not to find a readerly significance in this apparent movement, this ‘disappearance’ which may only be a reflection of the novel’s unfinished state. While Hering is right to be cautious of attempts to read the published *Pale King* as straightforwardly following the outline offered by these brief, early notes, we—as readers of the published text—are confronted with a ‘David Wallace’ whose position in the novel is, whether by design or accident, fundamentally unstable, a ‘Wallace’ who does indeed seem to ‘vanish’ into the incomplete, blank spaces of this unfinished work.

In addressing *TPK*’s radically precarious depiction of this fictionalised ‘author’, we are led to confront the question of whether, and in what form, we can discern the presence of the actual Wallace within this unfinished work. In their ostensibly direct address to the reader, the ‘Author Here’ chapters seem—at least on the surface—to promise an unmediated access to

---

<sup>126</sup> Within the novel’s fabricated ‘autobiography’, this bureaucratic mix-up is positioned as a fictionalised origin story for ‘Wallace’'s use of his middle name in his published writing: ‘For years afterward, I had morbid anxieties about there being God only knew how many other David Wallaces running around out there, doing God knows what; and I never again wanted to be professionally mistaken for or conflated with some other David Wallace. And then once you’ve fixed on a certain *nom de plume*, you’re more or less stuck with it, no matter how alien or pretentious it sounds to you in your everyday life’ (p. 297, n. 48).

Wallace-the-author, to the ‘living human holding the pencil’. In this, *TPK* serves as the culmination of a sequence which began with the address to/from the ‘fiction writer’ in ‘Octet’'s final ‘Pop Quiz’, and continued with the more explicit invocation of ‘David Wallace’ at the conclusion of ‘Good Old Neon’: here again, Wallace, positioning a version of himself within the narrative, stages a literalised, metafictional instance of direct ‘communication’ between author and reader. As in the preceding examples, this rhetorical gesture again works to remind us of the impossibility of this access, the incomplete nature of this ‘communication’. With his self-consciously fictionalised biography, and his parodically exaggerated ‘usurpations’ of Wallace’s stylistic tics, this ‘David Wallace’ is—even more starkly than the author-figures of either ‘Octet’ or ‘Good Old Neon’—self-evidently distinct from the novel’s actual author. Stephen Taylor Marsh argues that *TPK* finds Wallace using ‘the structure of autobiography to disarticulate his flesh-and blood self from the implied author [. . .] and from any potential narrators he uses’.<sup>127</sup> For Marsh, the ‘physical’ Wallace ‘cannot be found in the text’: his authorial presence is ‘barricaded off’, made deliberately inaccessible by the obfuscating, self-consciously *unreal* presence of this fictionalised ‘author’.<sup>128</sup> While Marsh is rightly suspicious of critical attempts to collapse *TPK*’s ‘Wallace’ into the real, extratextual Wallace, I would argue that his conception of this inviolable ‘barricade’ between text and writer ignores the ways in which this fictionalised ‘author’—and the various ‘David Wallaces’ found across ‘Octet’, ‘Good Old Neon’, and *TPK*—persistently invite this interpretative collapse, asking, demanding, or daring us to read aspects or traces of the real Wallace into these fictional works. Miley—while following Marsh in recognising the distinction between the real David Wallace (Wallace’s ‘private identity’) and ‘David Foster Wallace’ (the ‘public literary persona’ as embodied and parodied in *TPK*)—has suggested that the ‘authorial intrusions’ within Wallace’s writing ‘enable, if not encourage, the reader’s tendency to conflate’ these two distinct figures.<sup>129</sup> Even as we are made aware of the unreality of *TPK*’s ‘Wallace’, we cannot help but attempt to read him as a (partial, precarious, and flawed) reflection of the actual writer. In this way, the ostensible attempts at metafictional authorial ‘communication’ found across ‘Octet’, ‘Good Old Neon’, and *TPK* are read not as establishing ‘barricades’ between reader and author, but rather

<sup>127</sup> Stephen Taylor Marsh, ‘Self-Sacrifice in the Autobiographical Narration of David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*’, *Biography*, 39.2 (2016), 111–28 (p. 112).

<sup>128</sup> Marsh, p. 115.

<sup>129</sup> Miley, p. 196.

as staging a ‘showdown’, a dynamic conflict between Wallace’s private and public selves, wherein neither one is ever wholly separable or distinguishable from the other.<sup>130</sup>

The stakes of this question of how far these texts offers us access to the ‘real’ Wallace are greater—and, with this, more fraught and problematic—in the particular case of *TPK*. We have already noted how Pietsch’s ‘Editor’s Note’ invites us to conceive of *TPK* as a chance to ‘look once more inside [Wallace’s] extraordinary mind’ (p. ix), promising an almost supernatural reanimation of the departed author’s presence. In many respects, this biographical framing is an unavoidable aspect of any reading of a posthumous work: when confronted with novel as manifestly and self-consciously incomplete as *TPK*, it becomes impossible to separate the text from the troubled circumstances of its composition, from the facts of its author’s life and death. We cannot, perhaps, help but read the ‘ghostly’ presence of the actual Wallace into the unfinished ‘spaces’ of *TPK*: an impulse which has reflected in the various critical readings which have interpreted the novel as deliberately and reflexively addressing its own difficult genesis, from Groenland’s suggestion that Wallace ‘deliberately inscribe[d] his working difficulties within the work’,<sup>131</sup> to Hering’s assertion that the work ‘betrays a dramatization of its own composition’.<sup>132</sup> From this perspective, we can see how the novel’s fictionalised ‘David Wallace’ at once underlines this biographical framing—inviting (or demanding) that we read the work as an ‘act of communication’ from the ‘real’ Wallace—and also, in his persistently unstable, precarious characterisation, reminds us of the degree to which the actual Wallace remains inaccessible to us, impossible to locate within this fragmented, posthumously-organised text.

The innate problems involved in this biographical framing are revealed more starkly when considered specifically in relation to Wallace’s suicide. The circumstances of Wallace’s death have had a profound impact on the way readers approach and interpret his work, reframing our understanding of his fiction, and, in particular, recontextualising the concrete references to suicide found throughout his writing career: from Kate Gompert’s account of her own suicidal depression in *Jest*, to the mother’s undescribed act at the conclusion of *Brief Interviews*’ ‘Suicide as a Sort of Present’. This chapter has already addressed—in our discussion of Lane Dean’s horrifying experience of unbearable existential boredom, and Blanchot’s notion

---

<sup>130</sup> Miley, p. 191.

<sup>131</sup> Groenland, ‘A Recipe for a Brick’, p. 361.

<sup>132</sup> Hering, *Fiction and Form*, p. 162.

of the literary text's tendency towards suicidal, self-negating silence—how suicide is taken up as a key thematic and structural motif within *TPK*. Bennett has articulated how these narrative depictions of suicide and depression work both to reveal and to occlude the 'truth' of Wallace's 'own psychological condition':

In representing people as suffering from loneliness and from clinical depression, and as escaping depression by resorting to [. . .] suicide, Wallace continually draws on the special power of literature both to figure the authorial subject and to disguise it, to hide, to depersonalize the self, to eradicate it, in or by articulating it.<sup>133</sup>

In the wake of Wallace's own suicide, it is easy to see how these representations have taken on an additional autobiographical weight, a significance only partially present within the texts themselves. While this contextual 'reframing' is to some extent unavoidable, it is also dangerous, particularly in the degree to which it raises the temptation to 'read' Wallace's suicide alongside (or even as an aspect of) his writing. We find numerous examples of this kind of problematic interpretation within criticism of *TPK*: Godden and Szalay's analysis of the novel's treatment of bodies, for example, concludes with an admittedly intriguing—but fundamentally flawed—attempt to read a deliberate 'mirroring' between Wallace's own hanging 'body in the air' and the 'body in the text' of *TPK*'s incomplete manuscript.<sup>134</sup> Jonathan Franzen, meanwhile, has argued that Wallace 'died of boredom and in despair about his future novels'—an interpretation of Wallace's death which is, somewhat uncomfortably, worked into a wider critique of what Franzen regards as the 'despairing', narcissistic, inward-looking qualities of Wallace's fiction.<sup>135</sup> Most controversially, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly have approached Wallace's suicide from a symbolic perspective, reading his death as a reflection of the underlying contemporary 'nihilism' embodied within his writing: the fact of Wallace's suicide is thus bluntly abstracted into a generalised 'warning' for contemporary US culture, a

---

<sup>133</sup> Bennett, p. 71.

<sup>134</sup> Godden and Szalay, p. 1315. Godden and Szalay's thesis—an argument which they themselves acknowledge borders on the 'tasteless'—is hampered by their limited understanding of the fragmentary nature of *TPK*'s incomplete 'manuscript'. Throughout their essay, Godden and Szalay make confident reference to 'the manuscript' and 'the typescript' for *TPK* as if this were a single, coherent document, even though, as Groenland has noted, 'no such unitary document exists' ('A Recipe for a Brick', p. 374, n. 8). Groenland rightly argues that this mistake suggests 'an inadequate apprehension of the multiplicity and complexity of material included in the work', an interpretative failure which undermines their confident 'claims about the author's intentions', including their contentious reading of the 'mirroring' between suicide and text ('A Recipe for a Brick', p. 374, n. 8).

<sup>135</sup> Jonathan Franzen, 'Farther Away', *The New Yorker*, 4 November 2011  
<<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/18/farther-away-2>> [accessed 3 June 2019].

‘canary in the coal mine of modern existence’.<sup>136</sup> In their questionable attempts to approach Wallace’s death as a ‘text’ in its own right—a direct reflection or extension of his writing—these readings are easy to dismiss as variously misguided, tasteless, or offensive.<sup>137</sup> Nevertheless, these problematic, flawed interpretations illustrate the innate difficulty of approaching or interpreting *TPK* on its own terms—the impossibility of separating *TPK*’s text from the circumstances surrounding its incompleteness. While Wallace’s suicide may remain unreadable in itself, we, as readers of Wallace’s unfinished novel, cannot help but let it shape our understanding of the text in front of us, or our understanding of Wallace’s wider body of work.

In this, *TPK* presents us with an interpretative difficulty comparable to that which Paul de Man finds in his strange and striking reading of Percy Shelley’s unfinished poem *The Triumph of Life*: a work, which, as de Man acknowledges, likewise exists as a ‘fragment that has been unearthed, edited, reconstructed and much discussed’.<sup>138</sup> De Man’s reading, which focuses closely on points of linguistic ‘disfiguration’ in Shelley’s text, is eventually confronted with a ‘decisive textual articulation’: an unavoidable awareness of the poem’s ‘reduction to the status of a fragment brought about by the actual death and subsequent disfigurement of Shelley’s body, burned after his boat capsized and he drowned off the coast of Lerici’.<sup>139</sup> For de Man, Shelley’s ‘defaced body’ is both ‘present in the margin of the last manuscript page’ and ‘an inseparable part of the poem’: our reading of *The Triumph of Life* is thus unavoidably informed by the fact of Shelley’s death—an ‘event which shapes the text but is not present in its represented or articulated meaning’.<sup>140</sup> *TPK*, like Shelley’s poem, presents us with a text ‘interrupted by an event that is no longer simply imaginary or symbolic’, demanding from us a reading which—even as it acknowledges the extratextual, and fundamentally un-‘readable’ quality of Wallace’s suicide—nonetheless confronts us with the ‘final test’, to paraphrase de Man, of ‘how one disposes of [Wallace’s] body’.<sup>141</sup>

---

<sup>136</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: The Free Press, 2011), p. 26.

<sup>137</sup> Indeed, they have duly been critiqued as such by a number of commentators: see, for example, Andersen, ‘David Foster Wallace and His Real Enemies’; Groenland, ‘A Recipe for a Brick’; Marsh.

<sup>138</sup> Paul de Man, ‘Shelley Disfigured’, in Harold Bloom and others, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1979), pp. 39–73 (p. 39).

<sup>139</sup> De Man, p. 66.

<sup>140</sup> De Man, p. 67.

<sup>141</sup> De Man, p. 67.

How, then, can we make sense of this problem? How can we engage in a reading of *TPK* which takes into account Wallace's authorial presence within the text—a presence which, while 'ghostly' in its precariousness and uncertainty, is seemingly inescapable—without flattening out the contradictions and complexities of this unfinished work, reducing the novel to a simplistic 'reflection' of its author's life (or, indeed, his death)? A useful interpretative model can be found, I would argue, if we turn to Kafka. Amid the range of intertexts invoked throughout Wallace's writing career, Kafka's work stands as a consistent influence: Max notes how the teenage Wallace pasted 'a newspaper picture of Kafka to the wall of tennis stars on the corkboard in his room',<sup>142</sup> while Wallace himself—in a short 1999 essay on Kafka's humour—expressed his admiration for the 'grotesque, gorgeous, and thoroughly modern complexity' of Kafka's stories.<sup>143</sup> Kafka's intertextual impact on Wallace's fiction has been addressed by a number of critics,<sup>144</sup> with the most sustained and detailed exploration offered by Thompson, who argues that Wallace was profoundly influenced both by Kafka's particular, ambiguous employment of humour (as addressed in Wallace's essay), and more generally by the 'nightmarish vision of humanity' which pervades Kafka's writing.<sup>145</sup> While generally less overt than his intertextual engagements with, for example, Barth, Pynchon, or DeLillo—Thompson acknowledges that 'Wallace's appropriations of Kafka are often more tonal, permeating his work in subtle ways'—Kafka is nevertheless seen to stand as a literary 'touchstone' for Wallace, an 'ever-present point of reference, a comparative figure against whom he could assess the value and success of his own work'.<sup>146</sup> We find clear examples of the intertextual appropriation and transposition described by Thompson—the borrowings of Kafka's 'specific literary strategies and ideas'—within *TPK*.<sup>147</sup> In its concern with the vast, unmanageable bureaucratic systems (and failures) of late-20<sup>th</sup> century experience, *TPK* inevitably both recalls and expands on *The Castle*'s earlier evocation of a world in which 'officialdom and life' have become so 'interwoven' as to apparently have 'changed places'—a reference made explicit in 'David Wallace's' description of the IRS's Peoria REC as 'some kind of ur-bureaucratic version

---

<sup>142</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 12.

<sup>143</sup> Wallace, 'Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed', in *Consider The Lobster*, pp. 60–65 (p. 64).

<sup>144</sup> See, for example, De Bourcier, 'Syntax and Narrative', p. 23; Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 158; Staes, 'Only Artists Can Transfigure', 'Work in Process'.

<sup>145</sup> Thompson, *Global Wallace*, p. 130.

<sup>146</sup> Thompson, *Global Wallace*, p. 160.

<sup>147</sup> Thompson, *Global Wallace*, p. 156.

of Kafka's castle' (p. 263).<sup>148</sup> Elsewhere (in fact on the same page), meanwhile, we find Wallace directly plagiarising from Kafka's *Amerika*, with the extract from the letter of 'supporting documentation' (p. 262) brought along by 'Wallace' to the IRS ('He will be given a small job to begin with, and it will be his business to work his way up by diligence and attentiveness' (p. 263, n. 6)) lifted, as Staes has pointed out, 'almost verbatim from Kafka's novel'.<sup>149</sup>

Beyond these points of explicit influence, however, I would argue that Kafka's work holds further relevance for us in our attempts to find a way to read or make sense of *TPK*'s incompleteness. Kafka's fiction can be seen to inform Wallace's primarily in the extent to which it itself defined by an essential incompleteness. Like Wallace, Kafka's engagement with the unfinished is partially manifested in terms of a deliberate, self-conscious thematic and structural concern: we have only to think, for example, of the description which opens 'The Great Wall of China'—of the 'piecemeal construction' of the titular wall, the vast edifice marked by rumoured 'gaps which have never been filled in at all' but which 'cannot be verified [. . .] on account of the extent of the structure'—to find a consideration of unfinished-ness which anticipates that found across Wallace's writing.<sup>150</sup> Allen Thiher has suggested that Kafka's fiction can be characterised by its adherence to an underlying 'incompletion principle':

[. . .] nearly all of Kafka's texts are, implicitly at least, self-referential in that they are about their own development and movement, toward an encounter with revelation, the law, the Castle, or at least an understanding of why one is seeking to go wherever it is that one is going [. . .]. Since the text's encounter with whatever might be its goal does not take place, the trip is not completed, and the text often resembles an unfinished allegory, which is to say, a struggle to reach some realm where a meaning might be lodged.<sup>151</sup>

This sense of a self-consciously unfinished narrative movement unavoidably recalls the frustrated narratives, the resistance to closure, which we have traced across Wallace's work. Relatedly, Wallace's own essay on Kafka's humour significantly hinges on the notion of '*exformation*'—a term which Wallace defines as 'a certain quantity of vital information removed from but evoked by a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of

<sup>148</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, ed. by Idris Parry, trans. by J. Underwood (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 54.

<sup>149</sup> Staes, 'Work in Process', p. 72. See Kafka, *Amerika*, ed. by Klaus Mann and E. L. Doctorow, trans. by Willa Muir and Edwin Muir, Reprint edition (New York: Schocken, 1996), p. 133.

<sup>150</sup> Kafka, 'The Great Wall of China', trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir, in *The Complete Short Stories*, ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer (London: Vintage, 1999), pp. 235–48 (p. 235).

<sup>151</sup> Allen Thiher, *Understanding Franz Kafka* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2018), p. 39.



associative connections within the recipient'.<sup>152</sup> For Wallace, it is this sense of something left unsaid within, but nonetheless evoked by, a communication or narrative which defines both Kafka's uneasy 'funniness' and the ambiguous power of his stories more generally. We can see how this deliberate narrative 'space' left for the reader to negotiate or fill chimes with the self-conscious 'breaches' of, for example, *Broom*, *Jest*, or *Brief Interviews*.

As with Wallace's fiction, however, our reading of Kafka's deliberate strategies of incompletion ultimately conflicts with a concurrent awareness of the concrete unfinished-ness which marks his texts. Many of Kafka's works—including all three of his novels—were left unfinished and unpublished at the time of his death: dying of tuberculosis in 1924, Kafka famously requested that his friend Max Brod burn all of his papers and drafts, a request which Brod (equally famously) ignored, editing and posthumously publishing the stories and novels in their often fragmentary state (*The Castle*, for example, breaks off mid-sentence). As readers of Kafka's work, we are forced—just as we are in *TPK*—to negotiate the troubled intersection between a deliberate, thematic 'incompletion principle', and a much starker compositional, structural incompletion, one which, as in Wallace's novel, cannot be wholly explained away as a deliberate authorial strategy. In his biography of Kafka, Reiner Stach warns against the critical temptation to read the unfinished-ness of Kafka's works as an intentional aspect of the author's literary aesthetic:

It is [. . .] a legend-catering to the pseudo-Romantic concept of literature—that Kafka regarded failure in general and the fragmentary character of his novels in particular as the appropriate expression of his aesthetic desire or even of himself. The opposite is true. He greatly admired perfect formal unity and was determined to achieve it, a resolution evident in every one of his endeavors.<sup>153</sup>

For Stach, the incomplete state of so much of Kafka's work is bound up with a very real aesthetic disappointment, a persistent failure to reach the idealised point of 'perfect formal unity' which Kafka desired for his fiction. From a readerly perspective, however, it is clear that this recurring aspect of unfinished-ness and failure nevertheless informs our reading, coinciding with, and thus compounding, the resonance of the thematic incompletion identified by Thiher. Regardless of Kafka's authorial intentions, the actual structural incompletion of his stories

---

<sup>152</sup> Wallace, 'Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness', 64. Staes has traced the concept of 'exformation' back to Danish science writer Tor Nørretranders's 1998 book *The User Illusion*, a heavily annotated copy of which is notably present within Wallace's personal library at the Harry Ransom Center (Staes, 'Work in Process', p. 72).

<sup>153</sup> Reiner Stach, *Kafka: The Decisive Years*, trans. by Shelley Laura Frisch (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005), p. 242.

mirrors the ‘incompletion principle’ explored and enacted within his narratives, fundamentally shaping our readerly response to his work. Furthermore, these conflicting forms of incompleteness establish a seemingly unavoidable biographical frame for our interpretation: approaching Kafka’s stories, it becomes almost impossible to escape a contextual awareness of the circumstances surrounding their unfinished-ness (such as, for example, Kafka’s ignored instructions to Brod). Stach’s biography offers a clear illustration of the difficulty of disentangling Kafka’s fiction from his life: in its opening pages, Stach’s evocation of the ‘heap’ of textual ‘rubble’ left by Kafka is, for example, immediately juxtaposed—and thus inextricably connected—with a parallel awareness of Kafka’s short life as one ‘half lived, incomplete and senseless’.<sup>154</sup> Like the ghostly ‘presence’ of Wallace in *TPK*, Kafka’s fiction everywhere invites us to read Kafka himself *into* the work, to read these unfinished stories as (ambiguous, distorted) reflections of Kafka’s own ‘unfinished’ or ‘failed’ authorial experience.

While Kafka’s fragmentary stories and novels—texts which were most often consciously abandoned as abortive attempts to achieve the ‘perfect formal unity’ he desired—are not always straightforwardly analogous to the posthumous unfinished-ness of *TPK* (a text only ‘abandoned’ on Wallace’s death), we can see how Kafka nonetheless provides us with a prior example of a writer whose oeuvre is shaped by parallel thematic and compositional failures, by an incompletion which troubles the boundary between text and context, writer and work. Beyond this, Kafka’s writing—and the critical commentary surrounding his work—can be seen to offer us an idea of what an ‘incomplete reading’—the kind of reading seemingly demanded by *TPK*—might look like. An example approaching this kind of reading can, perhaps, be found if we return again to Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature*, and specifically to his discussion of Kafka. Within Blanchot’s reading, an awareness of Kafka’s life is an unavoidable aspect of any analysis of his work. Discussing Kafka’s diaries, Blanchot addresses how Kafka’s ‘numerous abandoned narratives’, his apparent inability or refusal ‘to write “in little bits”—in the incompleteness of discontinuous moments’, are tangled up with, and thus inseparable from, the broader ‘failed attempts’ which characterise Kafka’s biography:

Of all the undertakings to which he applies himself in order to orient his life differently, he himself will say that they are nothing but broken attempts, so many radii making the center of that incomplete circle, his life, bristle with dots. In 1922, he counts up all his projects and sees only failures: the piano, the

---

<sup>154</sup> Stach, p. 2–3.

violin, languages, German studies, anti-Zionism, Zionism, Hebraic studies, gardening, wood carving, literature, attempts at marriage, living independently [. . .]<sup>155</sup>

While this awareness of the details of Kafka's life informs his reading, however, Blanchot resists the impulse to interpret Kafka's works as a straightforward 'reflection' of their author, a means of getting 'inside Kafka's head'. Rather, Blanchot's analysis is always underlined by his definition of the 'solitude' of the literary work, the sense that, in our encounter with any text, '[h]e who writes the work is set aside; he who has written it is dismissed'.<sup>156</sup> For Blanchot, it is only in the act of *reading* that the physical literary 'book' ('a mute collection of sterile words, the most insignificant thing in the world') is transformed into a literary work.<sup>157</sup> In this way, our readerly encounter with Kafka's unfinished fiction—even as it is inevitably informed by the facts of Kafka's life—inevitably separates these texts from their author: 'the work, finally, knows him not. It closes in around his absence as the impersonal, anonymous affirmation that it is—and nothing more'.<sup>158</sup> Perhaps this reading resembles, or at least points us towards, the kind of interpretative activity demanded by Wallace's own incomplete, broken 'books': an interpretation which, while acknowledging the unavoidable contextual authorial 'presence' of the actual Wallace—the facts of his life, his struggles in composing *TPK*, and finally his suicide—also remains attuned to inevitable ways in which the act of reading itself serves to erase this 'real' Wallace, to affirm his absence from this incomplete work.

### 'Read These': Philosophy

When addressing a text as self-evidently unfinished as *TPK*, the question of defining the novel's 'core philosophy' is an inevitably vexed one. As with the range of literary reference points catalogued in the previous section, *TPK* finds Wallace invoking a broad spectrum of philosophical sources, one which has been extensively traced by critics: from Dulk's reading of the novel's debt to Kierkegaard;<sup>159</sup> to Bennett's exploration of the simultaneous, competing influences of Schopenhauer and 'optimist psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi';<sup>160</sup> to Boswell's discussion of the key significance of the American pragmatic philosopher William

---

<sup>155</sup> Blanchot, p. 64.

<sup>156</sup> Blanchot, pp. 21–3.

<sup>157</sup> Blanchot, p. 23.

<sup>158</sup> Blanchot, p. 23.

<sup>159</sup> Dulk, 'Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety'.

<sup>160</sup> Bennett, p. 72.

James.<sup>161</sup> In its references to these various—often conflicting—schools of thought, *TPK* seems to resist definition in terms of a unifying philosophical project: critical attempts to articulate *TPK*'s defining 'philosophy'—such as Baskin's assertion that Chris Fogle's extended narrative of 'conversion or transformation' should be regarded as the novel's 'moral and philosophical center'—flatten out the inherent complexities and contradictions of Wallace's unfinished text.<sup>162</sup> In part, this philosophical complexity is familiar from Wallace's previous work. Hayes-Brady has suggested that, far from adhering to the work of any single philosopher, Wallace rather engages in a series of 'probing, contradictory, and plural' encounters with numerous philosophies, 'taking what is useful and discarding what is not'—a strategy traceable back to *Broom*'s conflicting array of philosophical 'systems'.<sup>163</sup> Approaching *TPK*, however, we find this ambiguity amplified: faced with this incomplete text, we are left unable to determine where the philosophical (or structural) 'centre' of the work is or might have been. That critics such as Baskin have nevertheless attempted to do so is partly a result of the fact that *TPK* does—in its focus on the potentially transcendent value of 'paying attention' in the face of contemporary narcissism, nihilism, and boredom—seem to offer us the embryonic outline of a coherent philosophical project. Max argues that *TPK* was, more so than any of Wallace's earlier work, 'supposed to be prescriptive', to 'convince the reader that there was a way out' of the contemporary 'bind' articulated and explored across his preceding novels and stories.<sup>164</sup> While we may find traces of this 'prescriptive' impulse within *TPK*, however, this 'way out' is—whether deliberately or otherwise—absent from the published text. Even as it gestures towards this central project, our efforts to piece together *TPK*'s animating philosophy are persistently frustrated.

While the details of Wallace's intended philosophical project may remain beyond our reach, however, I would argue that, even in its unfinished state, *TPK* nonetheless invites us to consider and engage with a philosophy of *reading*, a reflexive consideration of how we read, interpret, and respond to literary texts. Undoubtedly, *TPK* is a novel consistently concerned with the question of how it is read. Turning again to the 'Author Here' chapters, we can see how these sections, beyond their explicit focus on the 'authorial' figure of 'David Wallace', place

---

<sup>161</sup> Boswell, 'Trickle-Down Citizenship', p. 219.

<sup>162</sup> Baskin, 'Untrendy Problems', pp. 156, 150.

<sup>163</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, p. 23.

<sup>164</sup> Max, *Every Love Story*, p. 280.

equal emphasis on our own position as readers: by ostensibly framing the work as ‘basically a nonfiction memoir’, ‘Wallace’ draws our attention to the complex, precarious nature of the ‘unspoken contract between a book’s author and its reader’ (pp. 74–5). Aside from its comically mercenary, legalistic framing, the fictionalised ‘Wallace’’s discussion of this ‘mutual contract’ leads us to reflect on how our own engagement with *TPK*—or with any literary work—is always founded on a dynamic exchange or interaction between reader and author (or, perhaps, between reader and text). While ‘Wallace’ fails—in his futile attempts to insist on the novel’s ‘really true’ nature—to assert total authorial control over our reading, we are nevertheless made aware of the fact that our interpretative efforts are at least partially shaped and directed by the text in front of us, and thus by the actual Wallace’s (ambiguous) authorial presence. Looking beyond these instances of explicit self-consciousness, meanwhile, we find *TPK* marked by points which provoke further interrogation of our own reading practice: as, for example, in §25—a chapter consisting almost entirely of descriptions of various IRS examiners turning pages (“‘Irrelevant” Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page [. . .]’ (p. 312)). §25 has been read as offering a concretisation of *TPK*’s ‘aesthetic of boredom’: Clare notes how, in its ‘double-columned reproduction of the tedium of IRS workers’ daily tasks’, the section stands as ‘a candidate for one of the “most boring” parts of the novel’.<sup>165</sup> This enacted monotony is punctuated, however, by a series of buried, oblique phrases scattered across the chapter (‘Devils are actually angels. [. . .] Every love story is a ghost story’ (p. 314)), sentences which, as Clare suggests, ‘reward the attentive reader’, seemingly offering—in their gnomic, vaguely mystical quality—a version of ‘transcendent’ insight which Wallace imagines on the ‘other side’ of tedium.<sup>166</sup> In its textual embodiment of this absolute boredom (and its vague gestures towards the ‘rewards’ which lie on its ‘other side’), the chapter forces us to take stock of the nature, and limits, of our reading of *TPK* as a whole, provoking a consideration of both the difficulty and the necessity of this kind of active engagement with the text.

*TPK*’s most suggestive example of this reflexive focus is, however, found in its brief opening chapter. Wallace’s novel (or, rather, Pietsch’s arrangement) begins with a pastoral evocation of the Illinois countryside: ‘Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines

<sup>165</sup> Clare, ‘The Politics of Boredom’, p. 203.

<sup>166</sup> Clare, ‘The Politics of Boredom’, p. 203.

of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak [. . .]' (p. 5). While this uncharacteristically lyrical description reads in part like another of the novel's intertextual 'usurpations',<sup>167</sup> the chapter's ending transcends this aspect of pastiche, concluding with a striking, ambiguous image of textual interpretation:

The pasture's crows standing at angles, turning up patties to get at the worms underneath, the shapes of the worms incised in the overturned dung and baked by the sun all day until hardened, there to stay, tiny vacant lines in rows and inset curls that do not close because head never quite touches tail. Read these.  
(p. 6)

In its closing words of instruction, the chapter's evocation of this 'very old land' is transfigured into a kind of text, a literary work left for us to 'read'. Burn has interpreted the chapter as a self-conscious 'allegory for the reading process, especially the process of reading a posthumous novel', and we can see how, in its final image of the 'shapes of the worms incised in the overturned dung', Wallace offers a vision of reading as an encounter with the unfinished: as Burn notes, the 'language' of these markings comes to mirror the posthumous text of *TPK* itself—these oblique 'symbols' are 'not themselves the sign of a present maker, but are a message that only becomes visible once the creature that created them has passed by'.<sup>168</sup> Beyond this, the markings themselves are defined by an inherent incompleteness, their 'inset curls' describing loops which 'do not close because head never quite touches tail': these unfinished loops offer a striking echo of the partially occluded typographical circle which extended over the edge of *Jest*'s final page, and, with this, of the 'broken circle' structure which defined the novel as a whole. Approaching *TPK*'s opening chapter, we are immediately presented with an apparent model for a kind of 'incomplete reading': a reading which can respond both to the specific, posthumous unfinished-ness of this text, and more widely to the incompleteness found across Wallace's fiction—indeed, the incompleteness inevitably present in any literary work. In this opening image of an oblique, ambiguous 'text', one which both resists and demands readerly interpretation, *TPK* invites us to consider how literary reading always involves an engagement with unfinished-ness—an active, subjective 'realisation' which is itself

---

<sup>167</sup> While the chapter's lyrical language seems once again to invoke the influence of Cormac McCarthy, Thompson notes that Wallace sketched out the plan for this opening section on the back sleeve of his copy of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, complete with 'relevant extracts' from Percy's novel which he 'presumably considered incorporating into this story' (Thompson, *Global Wallace*, p. 174).

<sup>168</sup> Burn, 'A Paradigm', p. 149.

never ‘complete’, never definitive in closing or finishing the ‘broken circles’ of the work.

This conception of literary interpretation as an active engagement with incompleteness brings us again back to Iser’s writing on the phenomenology of reading. For Iser, the act of reading is figured as a fundamentally ‘dynamic process’—one independent from, and yet inescapably shaped by, the printed text: while the ‘written part’ of the literary work ‘imposes certain limits’ on our interpretation, it is the ‘unwritten part’—the inevitable ‘gaps’ and ‘elements of indeterminacy’—which leaves space for the work’s subjective ‘realization’.<sup>169</sup> I would suggest that *TPK*—in its stark unfinished-ness—demands from us a particularly self-conscious manifestation of this ‘active’ reading: a reading which remains aware, both of the interpretative constraints presented by the novel’s fragmentary text, and also of the extent of our own activity in ‘realising’ this incomplete work, subjectively ‘filling in’ the novel’s manifold gaps in the construction of an inevitably precarious, provisional ‘whole’. With this, however, I would also argue that, in provoking this markedly active, self-reflexive readerly work, the novel simultaneously leads us to consider more broadly the incompleteness which characterises *any* encounter with a literary text. Beyond underlining its own unfinished-ness, *TPK* draws attention to an unfinished-ness at the heart of the reading process—to the fact that, in every act of literary ‘realisation’, both text and interpretation are revealed to be essentially, inescapably incomplete.

In this suggestion, *TPK* tests the limits of the somewhat mechanical, formalised framework of reader/text interaction theorised by Iser. A more pertinent critical reference point might be found if we turn to Felski’s more recent work on the nature of literary reading. In her attempts to present an alternative to the inflexibly suspicious position or ‘mood’ of critique—to gesture towards the possibility of ‘a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument’—Felski, like Iser, concerns herself with the phenomenology of reading, the nature of the interaction between reader and text.<sup>170</sup> In contrast with the rigidly structured ‘gaps’ and ‘ambiguities’ outlined by Iser, however, Felski’s approach takes into account the innate complexity, and the inevitably affective dimension, of this reader/text entanglement, concerning itself with what the text ‘sets alight in the reader—what kind of emotions it elicits, what changes of perception it prompts, what bonds and attachments it calls into being’.<sup>171</sup> I would suggest that Felski’s more diffuse, affective conception of literary interpretation captures, more acutely than

<sup>169</sup> Iser, ‘The Reading Process’, pp. 281, 288, 279.

<sup>170</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 3.

<sup>171</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp. 107, 179.

Iser's, the kind of 'incomplete reading' demanded by, and reflexively explored within, *TPK*. Returning to the opening chapter's evocative 'posthumous text', the 'rows and inset curls' left in the dung, we can see how reading is posited not merely as the 'filling in' of a schematic structure of textual 'spaces', but rather a more ambiguous encounter with a mysterious, suggestive, and finally unknowable 'document', with an unfinished-ness which cannot be straightforwardly 'completed' by the reader. This uneasy interaction seems to reflect our own readerly engagement with *TPK* itself: the unfinished novel's various gaps, blanks, and silences, while inviting a level of interpretative work on the part of the reader, remain 'unfillable' and unreadable, the text's 'breaches' opening outwards onto our own contextual awareness of the work's troubled compositional history, and of the tragic, inescapable fact of Wallace's suicide. We can see then, how *TPK*'s opening chapter reflexively invites us into a consideration of the *felt experience* of reading an unfinished work, the strange, unsettling readerly 'work' involved in approaching and interpreting an incomplete text. With this, perhaps, Wallace's text also directs us towards a particular *mode* of reading: one capable of recognising, attending to, and engaging with this troubling unfinished-ness—a kind of interpretation equipped to confront the underlying incompleteness, both of Wallace's final novel, and, to some extent, of any fictional text.

In attempting to more confidently outline a philosophical foundation for this 'incomplete reading', it is worth us turning back, once more, to Wittgenstein. A potential model for this 'unfinished interpretation' can be found in the *Philosophical Investigations*—and, specifically, in the metaphilosophical 'frame' offered by Wittgenstein's preface to his own work. In its 'grammatical' investigations, the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* seems—as we explored in the first chapter—to deny the possibility of any 'complete' philosophical account of language: we are positioned *inside* language, with no way to 'command a clear view' of the totality of its uses, no way to describe or analyse it as a 'whole'.<sup>172</sup> Despite its apparent resistance to categorisation in terms of either the 'complete' or the 'incomplete', however, Wittgenstein's preface nonetheless frames the text's project as bound up with an aspect of incompleteness. Outlining his intentions for the book, Wittgenstein notes how he had originally hoped to draw his various philosophical enquiries into a coherent whole: 'the essential thing was that the thoughts should process from one subject to another in a natural order and without

---

<sup>172</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, I, §90, §109, §122.



breaks'.<sup>173</sup> These intentions were, however, ultimately frustrated:

After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination.<sup>174</sup>

Here, the partial, granular structure of the *Investigations* is positioned as the result of a kind of failure, an inability to attain the completion and coherence which Wittgenstein intended for his project. Nevertheless, this incompleteness is figured in essentially positive terms: Wittgenstein goes on to note that the work's incompleteness 'was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction'.<sup>175</sup> Even if the *Investigations* are incomplete, theirs is an innately constructive form of 'failure': far from fragmentary, 'broken' attempts, these various investigations are imagined as 'a number of sketches of landscapes' made over the course of Wittgenstein's 'long and involved journeyings'.<sup>176</sup> While not wholly separable from questions of incompleteness and failure, then (the preface concludes with Wittgenstein acknowledging that, while he 'should have liked to produce a good book', this has 'not come about'), the *Investigations* offers us an example of an incompleteness figured in pragmatic terms, an unfinished-ness which seems to hold a value of its own.<sup>177</sup>

We can see, then, how the 'incomplete' structure of the *Investigations* offers a potential example of the kind of 'unfinished' interpretation demanded by *TPK*. From this perspective, the stark, self-conscious unfinished-ness of Wallace's novel is seen to lead the reader to engage in the kind of granular, partial work of 'investigation' modelled by Wittgenstein's late philosophy: we are invited to view the text not as the broken fragments of an inaccessible whole, but rather as an accumulation of 'sketches' made 'over a wide field of thought', sketches which, while never attaining totality or coherence, nonetheless attain a cumulative utility or significance of their own. This late-Wittgensteinian approach can be seen to underpin a number of critical responses to Wallace's work: Dulk, for example has argued for the usefulness of reading Wallace's fiction—and literary fiction in general—as 'a form of grammatical investigation [. . .]

<sup>173</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 'Preface', p. vii.

<sup>174</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 'Preface', p. vii.

<sup>175</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 'Preface', p. vii.

<sup>176</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 'Preface', p. vii.

<sup>177</sup> Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 'Preface', p. viii.

as showing and exploring the structures of our language use'.<sup>178</sup> Meanwhile, Hayes-Brady's argument for the 'generative failure' of Wallace's writing is founded on a notion of the constructive unfinished-ness of philosophical enquiry which has its roots in the *Investigations*.<sup>179</sup> In these readings, *TPK*'s unfinished-ness (and the thematic incompleteness found across Wallace's work) is recuperated as an example of the kind of ongoing philosophical project modelled within Wittgenstein's late philosophy. As one point in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein famously suggests that there 'is not a philosophical method, although there are indeed methods, like different therapies': in these late-Wittgensteinian readings, the (notably incomplete) diagnostic intent of *TPK*—the 'prescriptive' impulse identified by Max—is reframed as an ongoing, necessarily unfinished, engagement in the 'therapeutic' work of the *Investigations*' philosophical enquiries.

While the pragmatic approach of the *Investigations* is useful, I would argue that *TPK* also directs us towards another, less straightforwardly constructive form of 'incomplete reading'. Even as it invokes the 'positive incompleteness' of the *Investigations*, our reading of *TPK* is concurrently haunted by an awareness of the more unsettling unfinished-ness of the *Tractatus*: the sense of an enquiry which *does* strive towards an imagined point of completion, but which falls short of reaching this 'ending', concluding with a self-contradictory gesture towards an unknowable silence, an 'unspeakable' negative space beyond the edges of text or language. This parallel philosophical model is in part established within *TPK* itself: the novel's persistent evocation of the 'tangle of contradictory and hopelessly complex facts' (p. 294, n. 46, emphasis added) which define contemporary experience inevitably brings to mind the *Tractatus*'s austere conception of a world which 'divides into facts', which consists of 'the totality of facts, not of things'.<sup>180</sup> A further, more specific echo of Wittgenstein's early philosophy, meanwhile, is found in §14, as an unnamed IRS examiner relates his intention to write a 'totally real, true-to-life play'—one which, in its direct representation of the tedium or IRS work, is 'unperformable':

---

<sup>178</sup> Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement*, p. 158.

<sup>179</sup> Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, pp. 22, 2. For a more general example of an approach to literary reading informed by both Wittgenstein and the subsequent tradition of 'ordinary language philosophers' (as exemplified by Rorty, Stanley Cavell, and J. L. Austin), see Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>180</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 1.2, 1.1.

The idea's that a wiggler, a rote examiner, is sitting poring over 1040s and attachments and cross-filed W-2s and 1099s and like that. [. . .] He sits there longer and longer until the audience gets more and more bored and restless, and finally they start leaving, first just a few and then the whole audience, whispering to each other how boring and terrible the play is. Then, once the audience have all left, the real action of the play can start. (p. 108)

In its total absence of dramatic action or movement, this 'play' seems ostensibly to serve as a further reflection of *TPK*'s depiction (and embodiment) of contemporary boredom. In the speaker's mysterious suggestion that the play's 'real action' only begins when the audience have left the theatre, however, the passage establishes a striking intertextual echo of Wittgenstein's early philosophy: specifically, Wittgenstein's letter to Ludwig von Ficker describing the *Tractatus* as consisting of 'two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written'.<sup>181</sup> Like the *Tractatus*, the speaker's play is split into 'two parts': a written/performed first part, and an unwritten, 'unperformable', and seemingly unspeakable (the speaker notably admits that he 'could never decide on the action, if there was any' (p. 108)) second part. For Wittgenstein, it is 'precisely this second part that is the important one', and we can see how, in its invocation of the *Tractatus*'s 'two-part' structure, *TPK* leads us to consider the vital significance of the 'unsaid' or 'unwritten' portions of its own text, the silent, unspeakable spaces which both surround and punctuate this unfinished work.<sup>182</sup> Reading *TPK*, we can see how our late-Wittgensteinian model of a constructive 'incomplete' reading is troubled and complicated by these gestures towards the more fundamental, 'unspeakable' incompleteness of the *Tractatus*. Like the Wallace of *Broom*, we as readers find ourselves positioned precariously between Wittgenstein's early and late philosophies: however much we try to read *TPK*'s fragments as a series of discrete, productive investigations, we cannot escape this simultaneous awareness of the text as the fragmentary remnants of something larger, something uncompleted (and, perhaps, uncompletable). Perhaps our own 'incomplete reading' must situate itself uneasily between these two versions of unfinished-ness: conscious both of the readerly possibilities offered by *TPK*'s open-ended, unfinished text, but also of the novel's status as something broken, impossible, and unreadable—a text which opens out onto the horrifying 'silence' of Wallace's suicide. Even as we find the text apparently engaging in a series of 'therapies', we cannot escape the knowledge that the novel's attempts at a 'diagnosis'

---

<sup>181</sup> Wittgenstein, 'Letters to Ludwig von Ficker', ed. by Allan Janik, trans. by Bruce Gillette, in *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives*, ed. by C. G. Luckhardt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 94–95.

<sup>182</sup> Wittgenstein, 'Letters to Ludwig von Ficker', pp. 94–5.

for contemporary culture are inevitably unfinished, undeniably broken. Reading *TPK*, then—like reading all of Wallace’s fiction—finally requires an active engagement with this unfinished-ness, a readerly effort which allows us both to recognise the very real incompleteness of these works, and also to acknowledge the power of these flaws, breaches, and failures.

## Conclusion

I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful.<sup>1</sup>

Kafka's remarkable short story 'The Burrow' opens with an assertion of an ostensible completeness, a seemingly 'successful' construction. The story's unnamed speaker—apparently some kind of mole-like creature—begins his narration from the self-proclaimed position of having finished the 'arduous labor' of excavating the titular burrow: an elaborate subterranean structure consisting of 'manifold passages and rooms' surrounding a central 'beautifully vaulted chamber', referred to as the 'Castle Keep'.<sup>2</sup> Even as he details his achievements, however, Kafka's narrator proceeds to qualify and problematise his assessment of the burrow's 'success': his boast that its entrance is 'secured as safely as anything in this world can be secured', for example, is followed by an uneasy acknowledgment that 'someone could step on the moss or break through it, and then my burrow would lie open, and anybody who liked [. . .] could make his way in and destroy everything for good'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as the story progresses, 'The Burrow's' speaker continues to circle, with increasing obsessiveness, around the inevitable failures of his efforts: the flaws, weaknesses, and 'unavoidable defects' which compromise the safety and quiet of his home, leaving it open to the 'attack' of unknown enemies.<sup>4</sup> These tortured spirals of self-critique come to a head at 'The Burrow's' (significantly unfinished) ending, as the speaker awaits the impending arrival of a (possibly imagined) 'great beast [. . .] dangerous beyond all one's powers of conception'—a beast which, significantly, never arrives, the story cutting off with the anticlimactic assertion that 'all remained unchanged'.<sup>5</sup> While the speaker may dream the 'dream of a completely perfect burrow', his 'castle' is finally defined, at the story's close, by an irrevocable *imperfection*. Despite his initial claims to the contrary, the burrow—like Kafka's story itself—reveals itself as a construction which can never be 'successful', which is necessarily unfinished and unfinishable.

In many respects, 'The Burrow' seems to offer us a striking, self-reflexive vision of the incompleteness which, throughout this thesis, we have consistently found positioned at the heart of the reading process. Kafka's nameless creature is motivated by a desire for 'stillness', for a

---

<sup>1</sup> Kafka, 'The Burrow', trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir, in *Complete Short Stories*, pp. 325–59 (p. 325).

<sup>2</sup> Kafka, 'The Burrow', pp. 329, 333, 328.

<sup>3</sup> Kafka, 'The Burrow', pp. 325.

<sup>4</sup> Kafka, 'The Burrow', pp. 332.

<sup>5</sup> Kafka, 'The Burrow', pp. 353, 359.

total silence: his creative endeavour is one of burrowing down and hollowing out, establishing a construction out of negative, empty space, 'wrested from the refractory soil with tooth and claw'.<sup>6</sup> In this way, the burrow's arrangement of absent spaces can be seen to figure the untenanted blankness at the heart of the literary text: the 'negativity' which Iser positions as the necessary 'unformulated background' of any work of fiction,<sup>7</sup> or perhaps the 'essential solitude' which Blanchot suggests defines the 'space' of literature.<sup>8</sup> The creature's burrow is, like Kafka's unfinished story, built on a fundamental 'hollowness', a space which can only ever be 'filled in' through the active work of readerly interpretation. With this, however, Kafka's story also undoubtedly presents us with a uniquely self-conscious manifestation of this incompleteness: an unfinished-ness which exceeds, and thus complicates our responses to, the typical and innate 'silences' of the literary work. In the speaker's obsessive examination of his own frustrated project—and, indeed, in the actual structural unfinished-ness of the text itself—we find 'The Burrow' establishing and interrogating a unique, particular form of aesthetic incompletion. Indeed, from its opening line onwards 'The Burrow' positions incompletion as an engine of literary possibility: like the speaker's 'castle', Kafka's story confronts us with a narrative built *out of* a continual self-conscious encounter with its own limitations, flaws, and failures.

Reading 'The Burrow', we find a crystallisation of a tension which has been felt throughout our exploration of Wallace's fiction. In tracing the various forms of incompletion which mark and define Wallace's oeuvre, we have found his writing repeatedly evoking an incompleteness inherent to the reading process. Wallace's work, I have suggested, is consistently concerned with investigating *how* we read, and the ways in which our reading always involves a necessary, active encounter with an aspect of textual unfinished-ness. While we acknowledge this general focus, however, it is impossible to ignore the extent to which Wallace, like Kafka, simultaneously evokes and explores a particular *kind* of incompleteness. In its innumerable instances of breakage, rupture, silence, and blankness, Wallace's writing is at every turn marked by a singularly stark and self-conscious incompletion, one which, like the creature in 'The Burrow', is committed to a relentless interrogation of its own flaws, errors and failures. In this aesthetic incompletion—an aesthetic which, at least to a certain extent, situates

---

<sup>6</sup> Kafka, 'The Burrow', pp. 327, 340.

<sup>7</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 226.

<sup>8</sup> Blanchot, p. 22.

Wallace's writing as part of a tradition stretching back to Kafka and Beckett—Wallace's writing undoubtedly demands from us a distinct mode of active reading, an interpretative 'work' which negotiates and responds to the specific textual broken-ness—both deliberate and inevitable—found everywhere across his own novels and stories.

Even in its self-conscious aesthetic incompleteness, however, Wallace's writing is never merely concerned with exploring its own textual failures, or indeed with affirming the value of a circumscribed class of comparably 'difficult', 'writerly' incomplete fictions. Rather, by consistently shifting our focus back on to our own reading practice, Wallace's manifestly 'broken' works invite (or perhaps demand) us to reflect upon and rethink our wider interpretative responses to literary texts. The published *Pale King* begins with this epigraph from Frank Bidart's poem 'Borges and I':

We fill pre-existing forms and when we  
fill them we change them and are changed.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond its IRS-appropriate pun on the filling of 'forms', *TPK*'s quotation of Bidart offers a suggestive image of the kind of literary engagement provoked and interrogated by Wallace's work: a mode of interpretation which takes into account our capacity as readers to 'change' the texts we encounter, and, with this, the ways we are in turn inevitably 'changed' by them as well. Here, once again, we find Wallace's work chiming with broader contemporary discussions around the place and nature of literary reading, such as Felski's discussion of the extent to which the reader is always 'intertwined and entangled with texts',<sup>10</sup> or Macé's consideration of the reading process as 'a moment of individuation':

In reading, and the way we deal with a book, we shape ourselves in the simplest possible sense: we move aside, in order to occupy a new sphere and be enveloped by it, to test out our own contours and our particular forms of separation. We invite ourselves into an exterior image; by engaging in an exchange with this new environment, we try out postures, feign gestures, and are as likely to lose ourselves in the intense environment of the book as to make an effort to remain detached from it.<sup>11</sup>

For Macé, the process of reading is characterised by an essentially affective, dynamic, and often disorienting interaction between text and reader. In Wallace's variously incomplete or failed fictions, we are repeatedly led to negotiate and think through this process of 'entanglement', to consider and reconsider both the hollow, unfinished 'form' of the work in front of us and the

---

<sup>9</sup> Frank Bidart, qtd. in Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> Macé, pp. 224–5.

correspondingly incomplete nature of our own reading.

While they stand as indisputable examples of ‘INTERPRET-ME’ fiction, then, I would suggest that the power of Wallace’s novels and stories is felt most keenly in the extent to which they direct our interpretations *outwards*, inviting us to address, and to think beyond, the limitations of his own body of work—limitations including the very real shortcomings which we addressed in the introduction to this thesis. If Wallace’s fiction invites a kind of ‘incomplete reading’, it is necessarily a reading with the capacity to confront these inarguable failures and limitations, to recognise the manifest problems of Wallace’s work, and, in this, to identify that which is still singular and vital about his writing. In this way, we are able to avoid treating Wallace as a monolithic, unimpeachable ‘voice of a generation’, and instead approach him as a writer always in dialogue with a range of other contemporary authors and fictions—a group exceeding (somewhat limited) field of ‘post-postmodern’ authors routinely cited as his literary successors.

We can trace clear lines of connection, for example, between the broken maximalism of Wallace’s fictions and the incomplete encyclopaedism of Roberto Bolaño’s monumental novel *2666*—a text which, like *TPK*, was published in an unfinished state after the author’s death. In a much-quoted passage from *2666*, Bolaño describes the reading habits of a ‘young pharmacist’ who ‘inarguably preferred minor works to major ones’, notably choosing to read ‘*The Metamorphosis* over *The Trial*’, ‘*Bartleby* over *Moby-Dick*’, ‘*A Simple Heart* over *Bouvard and Pécuchet*’, and ‘*A Christmas Carol* over *A Tale of Two Cities* or *The Pickwick Papers*’.<sup>12</sup> On learning this, the section’s protagonist—the Chilean philosophy professor Óscar Amalfitano—laments the ‘sad paradox’ that

Now even bookish pharmacists are afraid to take on the great, imperfect, torrential works, books that blaze paths into the unknown. They choose the perfect exercises of the great masters. Or what amounts to the same thing: they want to watch the great masters spar, but they have no interest in real combat, when the great masters struggle against that something, that something that terrifies us all, that something that cows us and spurs us on, amid blood and mortal wounds and stench.<sup>13</sup>

Bolaño identifies, and implicitly signals his own participation in, an extended tradition of ‘torrential’, encyclopaedic texts—texts which are powerful precisely in the extent to which they are ‘imperfect’ and incomplete, blazing (or even burrowing) ‘paths into the unknown’,

<sup>12</sup> Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, trans. by Natasha Wimmer (London: Picador, 2009), p. 227.

<sup>13</sup> Bolaño, p. 227.



approaching an unsayable ‘something that terrifies us all’. In this, *2666* establishes a model of aesthetic incompleteness which seems at least partially comparable to the defining unfinished-ness of Wallace’s work. Ward argues that Bolaño’s massive novel offers ‘an encyclopaedism that makes itself aware of its own weaknesses’, and, crucially, outlines a correspondingly incomplete mode of ‘active reading’, one with the ‘ability to reveal those blindnesses on which ideas of the world depend’.<sup>14</sup> With this, however, Bolaño also presents an expansion on the undeniably US-centric, predominantly white world of Wallace’s fictional encyclopaedias: in its self-consciously global focus (Ward notes that the novel demonstrates an ‘implicit disregard for or disinterest in the rigidity of national boundaries’), Bolaño puts forward a vision of an encyclopaedic ‘circle’ which, even in its necessary broken-ness, nonetheless offers a totality which troubles and exceeds the limited margins of Wallace’s work, insisting, as Ward has asserted, on ‘the radical potential of fiction to reconceive our sense of the world’.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in *2666* we find this encyclopaedic incompleteness specifically positioned as a necessary response to the particular violence of the contemporary world—the ‘blood and wounds and mortal stench’ strikingly crystallised in *2666*’s fourth section ‘The Part about the Crimes’, which offers a fictionalised account of the real-life ongoing epidemic of unsolved murders of women in Ciudad Juárez. Reading Bolaño’s novel, we are faced with an argument—laid out in terms more forceful than anywhere in Wallace’s fiction—for the radical potential of ‘incomplete reading’ as a means of reconfiguring not only the way we read literature, but more broadly the way we interpret the particular, horrifying ‘blindnesses’ which characterise 21<sup>st</sup> century experience.

Looking elsewhere, meanwhile, we find a very different iteration of ‘incomplete reading’ invoked by Ali Smith in her extraordinary 2014 novel *How to be Both*.<sup>16</sup> Although not framed in the self-evidently encyclopaedic, ‘torrential’ terms of *2666* or *Infinite Jest*, *How to be Both* nonetheless offers an arresting echo of Wallace’s fiction in its self-conscious concern with an unfinished-ness at the heart of the reading process—an unfinished-ness made explicitly manifest in the novel’s unconventional form. Smith’s novel is divided into two parts: one set in 15<sup>th</sup> century Ferrara, following the painter Francesco del Cossa, and another in contemporary Cambridge, following a sixteen-year-old girl named George. Crucially, these two sections—which overlap and interact with each other in curious and suggestive ways—are structured so

---

<sup>14</sup> Ward, pp. 24, 141.

<sup>15</sup> Ward, pp. 22, 159.

<sup>16</sup> Ali Smith, *How to Be Both* (Penguin, 2014).

that they can be read in either order: the novel was published in two editions, with Francesco's and George's stories respectively positioned first within the alternate texts. In its reversible structure, *How to be Both* provokes a reading built on inevitable interpretative and aesthetic limits: in an interview following the novel's publication, Smith noted that she was interested in 'exploring fiction's problem of representing synchronicity; the fact that whereas in life all sorts of things can happen at the same moment, on the page one event must precede the other'.<sup>17</sup> While Smith's novel does not present us with the manifest 'broken-ness'—the visible breaks and incompletions—which mark Wallace's novels and stories, it is nevertheless comparably concerned with the 'problems', the innate constraints, of the fictional text—and, with this, the corresponding constraints of our own reading. Later in the same interview, she commented that 'whatever way you read this book, you're stuck with it. There are two ways to read this novel, but you'll end up reading one of them'.<sup>18</sup> Reading *How to be Both*, we are made inescapably aware of the extent to which we are 'stuck' with an interpretation which is always, in a sense, incomplete. In a review of the novel, Laura Miller offers a representative readerly response in her conclusion that, while

the two halves of *How to Be Both* may be read in either order with satisfying results, once read, it's impossible to know what it would be like to first encounter it in the alternate order. Is George's portion of the novel, as it seems to me, the more profound one, or do I feel this only because as I reached the resolution of her story, the cumulative power of the whole book had taken effect? What is read cannot be unread, because [. . .] *How to Be Both* is unforgettable. I can never know what it would be like to meet George before knowing Del Cossa, so that version of the novel is forever lost to me. It's a bit sad. But it was worth it.<sup>19</sup>

Like Wallace, Smith uses her fiction to provoke a reflexive consideration of the innate unfinished-ness of our own engagement with the text: the fact that our reading of *How to be Both* is unavoidably partial, unavoidably incomplete. With this, she also leads us to reflexively consider the fundamentally affective dimensions of this incomplete readerly entanglement, the aspect of inevitable 'sadness' involved in feeling that the text 'cannot be unread', cannot be 'completed'. Where Wallace's unfinished works seem to burrow, like Kafka's creature, towards

---

<sup>17</sup> Smith, 'Interview with Alex Clark', *Guardian*, 6 September 2014, section Books, para. 4 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/06/ali-smith-interview-how-to-be-both>> [accessed 30 September 2019].

<sup>18</sup> Smith, 'Interview with Clark', para. 17.

<sup>19</sup> Laura Miller, 'Review of *How to Be Both*', *Guardian*, 13 September 2014, section Books, para. 9 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/13/how-to-be-both-ali-smith-review-novel>> [accessed 30 September 2019].

a self-negating ‘hollowness’, however, Smith’s novel can instead be seen to gesture towards a more wholly productive set of aesthetic possibilities within this interpretative incompleteness: its incompleteness is, in Miller’s terms, ‘worth it’. In her interview with Clark, Smith asserts that *How to be Both*’s structure is supposed to be ‘about fresco form’:

You have the very first version of the fresco underneath the skin, as it were, of the real fresco. There's a fresco on the wall: there it is, you and I look at it, we see it right in front of us; underneath that there's another version of the story and it may or may not be connected to the surface. And they're both in front of our eyes, but you can only see one, or you see one first. So it's about the understory.<sup>20</sup>

Smith’s novel finally moves away from Wallace’s fiction in offering an affirmation of a (crucially unreachable) ‘bothness’—tracing, in its incompleteness, the outline of an ‘understory’, an aesthetic potential which is only ever partially accessible, teasingly present ‘beneath the surface’ of the fictional text.<sup>21</sup>

In these brief examples, we gain a sense of the ways in which Wallace’s unfinished oeuvre offers us a productive interpretative frame, not only for approaching his own fictions, but also for engaging with a range of other contemporary authors who likewise use their work to evoke and confront a contemporary world shaped by unavoidable uncertainty, by proliferating instances of the unknowable, unreadable, or unspeakable. In his extended analysis of the *Tractatus*, Morris suggests that Wittgenstein’s early philosophical work is, at its self-negating conclusion, finally concerned with establishing ‘a certain kind of outlook’ in its readers: a means of surmounting its self-consciously ‘failed’ or ‘nonsensical’ propositions and seeing the world ‘as the mystic views it’—as a ‘limited whole’.<sup>22</sup> It is perhaps something akin to this ‘certain outlook’, then, which we can take from Wallace’s own undeniably flawed, incomplete texts: a means of looking beyond his own work, of negotiating an incompleteness present in a range of contemporary (and, indeed, historical) literary texts, and, with this, of making sense of the ways in which our own reading is fundamentally, necessarily, and perhaps even productively

---

<sup>20</sup> Smith, ‘Interview with Clark’, para. 5.

<sup>21</sup> In this, Smith’s novel inevitably recalls, and arguably offers a reconfiguration of, the more troubling ‘muddy *bothness*’ which Wallace explores in his essay on David Lynch—a bothness which, he argues, ‘makes the real world of moral selves so tense and uncomfortable’, and which is captured in the capacity of Lynch’s films to ‘make us feel uncomfortable, pissed off’, and ‘Betrayed’ (Wallace, ‘David Lynch Keeps His Head’, in *A Supposedly Fun Thing*, pp. 146–212 (p. 211)). For further discussion of Wallace’s treatment of ‘bothness’, and its significance in terms of the ‘persistent plurality’ of his fiction, see Hayes Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, pp. 21–7.

<sup>22</sup> Morris, p. 328; Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.45.

## Bibliography

- Alcorn, Alfred, 'Review of *Girl with Curious Hair*', *Harvard Book Review*, 15/16, 1990, 14–15
- Aleksander, Irina, 'How Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Other Progressives Are Defining the Midterms', *Vogue*, 15 October 2018 <<https://www.vogue.com/article/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-interview-vogue-november-2018-issue>> [accessed 13 May 2019]
- Andersen, Tore Rye, 'Judging by the Cover', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 53.3 (2012), 251–78
- , 'Pay Attention! David Foster Wallace and His Real Enemies', *English Studies*, 95.1 (2014), 7–24
- Anker, Elizabeth S., and Rita Felski, eds., *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017)
- Araya, Jorge, 'Why the Whiteness?: Race in *The Pale King*', in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Philip Coleman (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2015), pp. 238–251
- Ashbery, John, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 1975)
- Baetens, Jan, 'OuLiPo and Proceduralism', in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. by Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 115–127
- Barth, John, *The Friday Book* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984)
- , *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988)
- Barthes, Roland, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974)
- , *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977)
- , *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980)
- Baskin, Jon, 'Death Is Not the End', *The Point*, Spring 2009  
<<https://thepointmag.com/2009/criticism/death-is-not-the-end>> [accessed 14 May 2019]
- , 'Untrendy Problems: *The Pale King*'s Philosophical Inspirations', in *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 141–56
- Beckett, Samuel, *Watt* (London: Calder Publications, 1963)
- , *Proust, and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, 3rd edn (London: Calder Publications Ltd, 1969)
- , 'German Letter of 1937', in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. by Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 172

- , *Company / Ill Seen Ill Said / Worstward Ho / Stirrings Still* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009)
- Bennett, Andrew, 'Inside David Foster Wallace's Head: Attention, Loneliness, Suicide, and the Other Side of Boredom', in *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 69–83
- Berkeley, George, 'Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America', in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne, Volume 7*, ed. by A. A. Luce (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1955), p. 373
- Bersani, Leo, and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994)
- Birkerts, Sven, 'David Foster Wallace', in *American Energies: Essays on Fiction* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1992)
- , 'Infinite Jest: A Postmodern Saga of Damnation and Salvation', *The Atlantic*, 1996 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1996/02/the-alchemists-retort/376533/>> [accessed 25 January 2019]
- Blanchot, Maurice, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982)
- Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)
- Bloom, Harold, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey H. Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1979)
- Boddy, Kasia, 'Lynne Tillman and the Great American Novel', *Electronic Book Review*, 2011 <<https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/lynne-tillman-and-the-great-american-novel/>> [accessed 22 July 2019]
- , 'A Fiction of Response: *Girl with Curious Hair* in Context' in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 23–41
- Bolaño, Roberto, *2666*, trans. by Natasha Wimmer (London: Picador, 2009)
- Bolger, Robert K., and Scott Korb, eds., *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014)
- Boswell, Marshall, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003)
- , '"The Constant Monologue Inside Your Head": *Oblivion* and the Nightmare of Consciousness', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 151–170

- , ‘Author Here: The Legal Fiction of David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*’, *English Studies*, 95.1 (2014), 25–39
- , ed., *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014)
- , ‘Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in *The Pale King*’, in *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. by Marshall Boswell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 209–225
- , *The Wallace Effect* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019)
- Boswell, Marshall, and Stephen J. Burn, eds., *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)
- Boxall, Peter, ‘DeLillo and Media Culture’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, ed. by John N. Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)
- Buell, Lawrence, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014)
- Burn, Stephen J., *David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide*, 1st edn (London: Continuum, 2003)
- , ‘The Machine in the Ghost’, *American Book Review*, 32.5 (2011), 16
- , *David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide*, 2nd edn (London: Continuum, 2012)
- , ed., *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012)
- , ‘Toward a General Theory of Vision in Wallace’s Fiction’, *English Studies*, 95.1 (2014), 85–93
- , ‘“A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness”: *The Pale King*’, in *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. by Marshall Boswell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 149–168
- Cahn, Stephen M., and Maureen Eckert, eds., *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015)
- Carlisle, Greg, *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2007), Amazon Kindle eBook
- , ‘Introduction: Consider David Foster Wallace’, in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 12–23
- , *Nature’s Nightmare: Analyzing David Foster Wallace’s Oblivion* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2013), Amazon Kindle eBook

- Carveth, Rod, and J. Metz, 'Frederick Jackson Turner and the Democratization of the Electronic Frontier', *The American Sociologist*, 27.1 (1996), 72–90
- Cioffi, Frank Louis, "'An Anguish Become Thing': Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", *Narrative*, 2000, 161–181
- Clare, Ralph, 'The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in *The Pale King*', in *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. by Marshall Boswell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 187–208
- , ed., *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)
- Clark, Robert C., *American Literary Minimalism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015)
- Cohen, Samuel, 'To Wish to Try to Sing to the Next Generation: *Infinite Jest*'s History', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 59–79
- Cohen, Samuel, and Lee Konstantinou, eds., *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012)
- Coleman, Philip, 'Consider Berkely & Co.: Reading "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way"', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 62–74
- , ed., *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace* (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2015)
- Connor, Steven, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014)
- Coughlan, David, "'Sappy or no, it's true": Affect and Expression in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*', in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Philip Coleman (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2015), pp. 160–175
- Coyle, Deirdre, 'Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me', *Electric Literature*, 17 April 2017 <<https://electricliterature.com/men-recommend-david-foster-wallace-to-me/>> [accessed 13 May 2019]
- De Bourcier, Simon, 'Forms, Punch Cards and LETTERS: Self-Reference, Recursion and (Un)Self-Consciousness in *The Pale King*'s Representation of Bureaucracy', *English Studies*, 95.1 (2014), 40–58
- , "'They All Sound Like David Foster Wallace": Syntax and Narrative in *Infinite Jest*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, *Oblivion* and *The Pale King*', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5.1 (2017), 1–30 <<https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.207>>
- De Forest, John William, 'The Great American Novel', *The Nation*, 9 January 1868, pp. 27–28

- Dean, Michelle, 'A Conversation With D.T. Max About His New David Foster Wallace Biography', *The Awl*, 2012 <<https://www.theawl.com/2012/08/a-conversation-with-d-t-max-about-his-new-david-foster-wallace-biography/>> [accessed 12 February 2019]
- DeLillo, Don, *Americana* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1971)
- , *End Zone* (New York: Penguin, 1972)
- , *Great Jones Street* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1973)
- , *Ratner's Star* (New York: Random House, 1989)
- , *Mao II* (London: Vintage, 1992)
- , 'Letter to David Foster Wallace, 5<sup>th</sup> February 1997', Don DeLillo Papers Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Box 101.10
- , *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998)
- , 'Informal Remarks from the David Foster Wallace Memorial Service in New York on October 23, 2008', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 23
- Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976)
- , *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978)
- Dreyfus, Hubert L., and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: The Free Press, 2011)
- Dulk, Allard den, 'Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self', in *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. by Marshall Boswell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 43–60
- , *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015)
- Egan, Jennifer, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (London: Corsair, 2011)
- Ercolino, Stefano, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015)
- Eugenides, Jeffrey, *The Marriage Plot* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012)
- Evans, C. J., 'All Its Horror and Unbound Power: David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*', *Quarterly Conversation*, 6 June 2011  
<<http://quarterlyconversation.com/david-foster-wallace-brief-interviews-with-hideous-men>> [accessed 2 August 2019]
- Eve, Martin Paul, 'Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace and the Problems of "Metamodernism": Post-Millennial Post-Postmodernism?', *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*, 1.1 (2012), 7–25



- Felski, Rita, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015)
- Fest, Bradley J., “‘Then Out of the Rubble’: David Foster Wallace’s Early Fiction”, in *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. by Marshall Boswell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 85–105
- Foran, Jack, ‘The Strange Sentence in “The Dead”’, *MLN*, 113.5 (1998), 1151–59
- Foster, Graham, ‘A Deep Insider’s Elegiac Tribute: The Work of Don DeLillo in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*’, *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 4.2 (2016), 1–20  
<<https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.127>>
- Franzen, Jonathan, ‘Farther Away’, *The New Yorker*, 4 November 2011  
<<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/18/farther-away-2>> [accessed 3 June 2019]
- Garber, Megan, ‘David Foster Wallace and the Dangerous Romance of Male Genius’, *The Atlantic*, 9 May 2018 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/05/the-world-still-spins-around-male-genius/559925/>> [accessed 31 May 2019]
- Garfield, Jay, ‘David Foster Wallace as Student: A Memoir’, in David Foster Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, ed. by Stephen M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 219–221
- Genette, Gérard, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)
- Giles, Paul, ‘Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 53.3 (2007), 327–44
- , ‘All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature’, in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 3–22
- Godden, Richard, and Michael Szalay, ‘The Bodies in the Bubble: David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*’, *Textual Practice*, 28.7 (2014), 1273–1322
- Goerlandt, Iannis, “‘Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away’: Irony and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 47.3 (2006), 309–28
- Groenland, Tim, ‘A King of Shreds and Patches: Assembling Wallace’s Final Novel’, in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Philip Coleman (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2015), pp. 221–37
- , “‘A Recipe for a Brick’: *The Pale King* in Progress”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58.4 (2017), 365–76
- , *The Art of Editing: Raymond Carver and David Foster Wallace* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019)

- Harbach, Chad, 'David Foster Wallace!', *N+1*, 2004 <<https://nplusonemag.com/issue-1/reviews/david-foster-wallace/>> [accessed 2 August 2019]
- Harris, Charles B., 'The Anxiety of Influence: The John Barth/David Foster Wallace Connection', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 55.2 (2014), 103–26
- Harvey, David, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)
- Hassan, Ihab, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967)
- Hayes-Brady, Clare, 'The Book, the Broom and the Ladder: Philosophical Groundings in the work of David Foster Wallace', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 24–36
- , '"...": Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 131–150
- , *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016)
- , '"Palely Loitering": On Not Finishing (in) *The Pale King*, in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 142–55
- Hemingway, Ernest, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner, 1932)
- Henry, Casey Michael, '"Sudden Awakening to the Fact That the Mischief Is Irretrievably Done": Epiphanic Structure in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56.5 (2015), 480–502
- Hering, David, ed., *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Los Angeles: SSMG Press, 2010)
- , 'Triangles, Cycles, Choices and Chases', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 89–100
- , 'Form as Strategy', in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Philip Coleman (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2015), pp. 128–43
- , *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016)
- Herzog, Katie, 'We Have Entered David Foster Wallace's Dystopian Future', *The Stranger*, 19 December 2017 <<https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2017/12/19/25639990/we-have-entered-david-foster-wallaces-dystopian-future>> [accessed 14 May 2019]
- Hoberek, Andrew, 'Wallace and American Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 33–48

- Holland, Mary K., “‘The Art’s Heart’s Purpose’: Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 47.3 (2006), 218–42
- , ‘Mediated Immediacy in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*’, in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 107–30
- , “‘By Hirsute Author’: Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58.1 (2017), 64–77
- , ‘*Infinite Jest*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 127–41
- Horn, Patrick, ‘Does Language Fail Us? Wallace’s Struggle with Solipsism’, in *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 245–270
- Hudson, Cory M., ‘David Foster Wallace Is Not Your Friend: The Fraudulence of Empathy in David Foster Wallace Studies and “Good Old Neon”’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59.3 (2018), 295–306
- Iser, Wolfgang, ‘The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach’, *New Literary History*, 3.2 (1972), 279–99
- , *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge, 1978)
- Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992)
- Joyce, James, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Seamus Deane (London: Penguin, 1992)
- , *Dubliners* (London: Harper Collins, 1994)
- Kafka, Franz, *Amerika*, ed. by Klaus Mann and E. L. Doctorow, trans. by Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken, 1996)
- , *The Complete Short Stories*, ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer (London: Vintage, 1999)
- , *The Castle*, ed. by Idris Parry, trans. by J. Underwood (London: Penguin Classics, 2000)
- Kakutani, Michiko, ‘Books of The Times; Life in Cleveland, 1990: Review of *The Broom of the System*’, *New York Times*, 27 December 1986, section Books  
<<https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/27/books/books-of-the-times-life-in-cleveland-1990.html>> [accessed 18 June 2019]
- , ‘Books of the Times; A Country Dying of Laughter. In 1,079 Pages: Review of *Infinite Jest*’, *The New York Times*, 13 February 1996, section Books  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/13/books/books-of-the-times-a-country-dying-of-laughter-in-1079-pages.html>> [accessed 18 October 2014]

Karl, Frederick R., 'American Fictions: The Mega-Novel', *Conjunctions*, 7, 1985, 248–60

Karr, Mary, 'Mary Karr, Author on Twitter: "Deeply Saddened by the Allegations against #JunotDiaz & I Support Every Woman Brave Enough to Speak. The Violence #DavidFosterWallace Inflicted on Me as a Single Mom Was Ignored by His Biographer & @NewYorker as 'Alleged' despite My Having Letters in His Hand. But DFW Was White." / Twitter', *Twitter*  
<<https://twitter.com/marykarrlit/status/992545700004139008>> [accessed 13 May 2019]

Kelly, Adam, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010) pp. 131–46

———, 'David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline', *Irish Journal of American Studies Online*, 2, 2010, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26234254>> 47–59

———, 'David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas', in *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. by Marshall Boswell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 3–22

———, 'David Foster Wallace: The Critical Reception', in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Philip Coleman (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2015), pp. 46–62

Kenny, Anthony, *Wittgenstein*, revised edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006)

Kermode, Frank, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Kirsch, Adam, 'The Importance of Being Earnest', *New Republic*, 28 July 2011  
<<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books/magazine/92794/david-lipsky-foster-wallace-pale-king>> [accessed 15 January 2019]

Konstantinou, Lee, 'Unfinished Form', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 6 July 2011  
<<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/unfinished-form/>> [accessed 14 November 2018]

———, 'No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 83–112

———, 'Wallace's "Bad" Influence', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 49–66

Krasinski, John, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (IFC Films, 2009)

Latour, Bruno, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30.2 (2004), 225–48

LeClair, Tom, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988)

- , *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989)
- , 'The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 38.1 (1996), 12–37
- Levey, Nick, *Maximalism in Contemporary American Literature: The Uses of Detail* (London: Routledge, 2016)
- Levin, Jenifer, "'Love Is a Federal Highway": Review of *Girl with Curious Hair*', *New York Times*, 5 November 1989, section Books  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/05/books/love-is-a-federal-highway.html>> [accessed 13 July 2019]
- Letzler, David, 'Encyclopedic Novels and the Craft of Fiction', in *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. by Marshall Boswell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 127–147
- Lipsky, David, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010)
- Luter, Matthew, 'The Broom of the System and *Girl with Curious Hair*', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 67–81
- Luther, Connie, 'David Foster Wallace: Westward with Fredric Jameson', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 49–61
- Macé, Marielle, 'Ways of Reading, Modes of Being', trans. by Marlon Jones, *New Literary History*, 44.2 (2013), 213–29
- Maniatis, Nick, 'The Howling Fantods', *The Howling Fantods*  
<<http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/dfw/>> [accessed 15 May 2019]
- Markson, David, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2006)
- Marsh, Stephen Taylor, 'Self-Sacrifice in the Autobiographical Narration of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*', *Biography*, 39.2 (2016), 111–28
- Max, D. T., 'The Unfinished', *The New Yorker*, 3 February 2009  
<<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/03/09/the-unfinished>> [accessed 17 January 2019]
- , *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (London: Granta Publications, 2012)
- McCarthy, Cormac, *All the Pretty Horses* (London: Picador, 1993)
- McCarthy, Tom, 'David Foster Wallace: The Last Audit', *The New York Times*, 14 April 2011, section Books <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/books/review/book-review-the-pale-king-by-david-foster-wallace.html>> [accessed 6 August 2019]

- McGinn, Marie, *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations* (London: Routledge, 1997)
- McGurl, Mark, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011)
- , 'The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program', *Boundary 2*, 41.3 (2014), 27–54
- McHale, Brian, 'The Pale King, Or, The White Visitation', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 191–210
- McLaughlin, Robert L., 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World', *Symploke*, 12.1 (2004), 53–68
- Mendelson, Edward, 'Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon', *MLN*, 91.6 (1976), 1267–75
- Michael, John, 'Donald Trump Is Ushering In the *Infinite Jest* Apocalypse', *HuffPost*, 20 April 2015 <[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/donald-trump-is-ushering-\\_b\\_8334542](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/donald-trump-is-ushering-_b_8334542)> [accessed 13 May 2019]
- Miley, Mike, '... And Starring David Foster Wallace as Himself: Performance and Persona in *The Pale King*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 57.2 (2016), 191–207
- Miller, Laura, 'Review of *How to Be Both*', *Guardian*, 13 September 2014, section Books, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/13/how-to-be-both-ali-smith-review-novel>> [accessed 30 September 2019]
- Moi, Toril, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2017)
- Moore, Steven, 'The First Draft of *Infinite Jest*', *The Howling Fantods*, 2003 <[http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/ij\\_first.htm](http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/ij_first.htm)> [accessed 25 July 2019]
- Morris, Michael, *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Wittgenstein and the Tractatus* (London: Routledge, 2008)
- Nadel, Ira B., 'Consider the Footnote' in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 218–240
- Nadell, Bonnie, 'Letter to David Foster Wallace, 28 October 1985', Bonnie Nadell Collection of David Foster Wallace, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Box 1.1
- Nixon, Charles, 'Attention, Retention, and Extension in *Oblivion: Stories*', in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Philip Coleman (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2015), pp. 176–191
- North, Michael, 'A More than Infinite Jest', in *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 163–83

- O'Donnell, Patrick, 'Almost a Novel: *The Broom of the System*', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1–22
- Olsen, Lance, 'Termite Art, or Wallace's Wittgenstein', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13.2 (1993), 199–215
- , 'Beautiful *Oblivion*: Eighteen Notes', *Quarterly Conversation*, 6 June 2011  
<<http://quarterlyconversation.com/oblivion-david-foster-wallace>> [accessed 2 August 2019]
- Ozick, Cynthia, 'Usurpation (Other People's Stories)', in *Bloodshed and Three Novellas* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), pp. 131–78
- Paulson, Steve, and Clare Hayes-Brady, 'David Foster Wallace in the #MeToo Era: A Conversation with Clare Hayes-Brady', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 10 September 2018 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/david-foster-wallace-in-the-metoo-era-a-conversation-with-clare-hayes-brady/>> [accessed 13 May 2019]
- Phillips, Brian, 'The Negative Style of David Foster Wallace', *The Hudson Review*, 57.4 (2005), 675–82
- Pietsch, Michael, 'Editor's Note', in David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (London: Penguin, 2012), pp. i–xii
- Ponsoldt, James, *The End of the Tour* (A24, 2015)
- Pynchon, Thomas, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Vintage Classics, 1996)
- Quinn, Paul, "'Location's Location": Placing David Foster Wallace', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 87–106
- Ramal, Randy, 'Beyond Philosophy: David Foster Wallace on Literature, Wittgenstein, and the Dangers of Theorizing', in *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 177–198
- 'Review of *The Broom of the System*', *Kirkus Reviews*, 1 January 1986  
<<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/david-foster-wallace/broom-of-the-system/>> [accessed 18 June 2019]
- Roache, John, "'The Realer, More Enduring and Sentimental Part of Him": David Foster Wallace's Personal Library and Marginalia', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5.1 (2017) <<https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.142>>
- Royle, Nicholas, *Jacques Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2003)
- Ryerson, James, 'Introduction: A Head That Throbbled Heartlike: The Philosophical Mind of David Foster Wallace', in David Foster Wallace, *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, ed. by Stephen M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 1–33

- Scott, A. O., 'The Panic of Influence', *New York Review of Books*, 10 February 2000  
 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/feb/10/the-panic-of-influence/>>  
 [accessed 17 May 2019]
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–51
- Severs, Jeffrey, "'Blank as the Faces on Coins": Currency and Embodied Value(s) in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 57.1 (2016), 52–66
- , *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017)
- Shapiro, Stephen, 'From Capitalist to Communist Abstraction: *The Pale King*'s Cultural Fix', *Textual Practice*, 28.7 (2014), 1249–71
- Shephard, Alex, 'Neil Gorsuch Will Be Our First Lit Bro Supreme Court Justice', *New Republic*, 21 March 2017 <<https://newrepublic.com/minutes/141498/neil-gorsuch-will-first-lit-bro-supreme-court-justice>> [accessed 31 May 2019]
- Sheridan, Mark, 'Interpret you, INTERPRET-ME? Or, Fictional Pasts and Fictional Futures: The Predecessors and Contemporaries of David Foster Wallace', in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Philip Coleman (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2015), pp. 78–93
- Smith, Ali, *How to Be Both* (Penguin, 2014)
- , 'Interview with Alex Clark', *Guardian*, 6 September 2014, section Books, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/06/ali-smith-interview-how-to-be-both>> [accessed 30 September 2019]
- Smith, Zadie, 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace', in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 257–300
- Sontag, Susan, *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1994)
- Stach, Reiner, *Kafka: The Decisive Years*, trans. by Shelley Laura Frisch (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005)
- Staes, Toon, "'Only Artists Can Transfigure": Kafka's Artists and the Possibility of Redemption in the Novellas of David Foster Wallace', *Orbis Litterarum*, 65.6 (2010), 459–80
- , 'Wallace and Empathy: A Narrative Approach', in *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels*, ed. by Marshall Boswell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 23–42
- , 'Work in Process: A Genesis for *The Pale King*', *English Studies*, 95.1 (2014), 70–84



- Staiger, Jeff, 'David Foster Wallace's Contest with Himself', *New England Review*, 36.2 (2015), 90–111
- Steiner, George, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967)
- Sullivan, John Jeremiah, 'Too Much Information', *GQ*, May 2011  
 <<https://www.gq.com/story/david-foster-wallace-the-pale-king-john-jeremiah-sullivan>>  
 [accessed 10 December 2018]
- Swartz, Aaron, 'What Happens at the End of *Infinite Jest*? (Or, the *Infinite Jest* Ending Explained)', *Aaron Swartz's Raw Thought*, 2019  
 <<http://www.aaronsw.com/weblog/ijend>> [accessed 1 September 2017]
- 'The Writer Who Was The Voice Of A Generation', *All Things Considered* (NPR, 2012)  
 <<https://www.npr.org/2012/09/02/160248690/the-writer-who-was-the-voice-of-a-generation>> [accessed 14 May 2019]
- Thiher, Allen, *Understanding Franz Kafka* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2018)
- Thompson, Lucas, "'Books Are Made out of Books": David Foster Wallace and Cormac McCarthy', *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, 13.1 (2015), 3–26
- , *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016)
- , 'Wallace and Race', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 204–19
- Tompkins, Jane P., ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980)
- Tracey, Thomas, 'Representations of Trauma in David Foster Wallace's *Oblivion*', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 172–186
- , 'The Formative Years: David Foster Wallace's Philosophical Influences and *The Broom of the System*', in *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, ed. by Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 157–175
- Turner, Frederick Jackson, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920)
- Wallace, David Foster, 'Letter to Bonnie Nadell, 13 October 1985', Bonnie Nadell Collection of David Foster Wallace, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Box 1.1
- , *The Broom of the System* (New York: Penguin, 1987)
- , *Girl with Curious Hair* (New York: Norton, 1989)

- , 'Letter to Don DeLillo, 11<sup>th</sup> June 1992', Don DeLillo Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Box 101.10
- , 'Interview with Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk' (1993), in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 11–20
- , 'Interview with Larry McCaffery' (1993), in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 21–52
- , 'Letter to Don DeLillo, circa May 1995', Don DeLillo Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Box 101.10
- , 'Interview with Laura Miller' (1996), in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 58–65
- , 'Interview with Mark Caro' (1996), in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 53–7
- , 'Interview with Michael Silverblatt', *Bookworm* (California: KCRW, 1996)  
<<https://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/david-foster-wallace-infinite-jest>> [accessed 25 July 2019]
- , 'Letter to Don DeLillo, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1996', Don DeLillo Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Box 101.10
- , 'Letter to Don DeLillo, 19<sup>th</sup> January 1997', Don DeLillo Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Box 101.10
- , *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1997)
- , 'Live Online with David Foster Wallace', *Word E-Zine*, 17 December 1997  
<<http://deadword.com/site1/habit/wallace/dfwtrans.html>> [accessed 16 July 2019]
- , *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 1998)
- , *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 1999)
- , 'Interview with Lorin Stein' (1999), in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 89–93
- , 'Interview with Patrick Arden' (1999), in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 94–100
- , 'Interview with Mark Schechner' (2000), in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 104–109
- , 'Interview with John O'Brien and Richard Powers' (2000), in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 110–120
- , *Oblivion: Stories* (London: Abacus, 2004)

- , *Consider the Lobster: Essays and Arguments* (London: Abacus, 2005)
- , *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (Little, Brown and Company, 2009)
- , *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, ed. by Stephen M. Cahn and Maureen Eckert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011)
- , *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (London: Penguin, 2012)
- , *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013)
- , *The David Foster Wallace Reader* (New York: Little, Brown, 2014)
- Ward, Kiron, 'Fictional Encyclopaedism in James Joyce, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Roberto Bolaño: Towards a Theory of Literary Totality' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2017)
- Waugh, Patricia, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1984)
- Williams, Iain, '(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace's "Octet"', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56.3 (2015), 299–314
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by Charles Kay Ogden (London: Routledge, 1922)
- , *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961)
- , *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd edn (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968)
- , 'Letters to Ludwig von Ficker', ed. by Allan Janik, trans. by Bruce Gillette, in *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives*, ed. by C. G. Luckhardt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 94–95